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BY

JANE H. SPETTIGUE

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JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER.

CHAPTER I.

SPOTS ON THE SUN.

"Through the perils of chance
May thy front be unaltered, thy courage elate!"
CAMPBELL.

"MYSELF against the world!"

This bold challenge was made in a large entrance-hall, floored and wainscotted with oak, which age had darkened, but not decayed. The three treble laughs that followed it—the loudest of which came from the speaker—rang through the place, and were echoed again and again from the long dark passages that led away from it. The hall itself would have been dim, with its black walls and narrow windows, had

not the great door leading to the lawn stood open, as it generally did in summer, and let a broad flood of sunshine in to light up the room, and be reflected from the suits of old armour which garnished the oak. It was reflected, too, from the bright figure of the girl who had spoken. She was tall and shapely, with rounded curves and plenty of action—having the figure of a woman with the face of a child. She was full-grown, though in reality but fourteen years old. Her hair was light brown, and limp, and although it was not in any way fastened up, it was neither long enough nor flowing enough to be inconvenient. Her eyes were a dark grey—lively—not dreamy, as eyes of that colour often are, shaded by long dark lashes. She had a saucy mouth, with a frequent pout which sent the full chin underneath too far out to look symmetrical. Hester Carnsew often enjoyed, amongst her other pleasures, a look at herself in a mirror, and fully appreciated her clear rich complexion; but she would never have dreamt of restraining any motion because it distorted her face or figure.

"Myself against the world!" she repeated, wrenching a croquêt mallet from its stand and swinging it around above her head as if it were indeed a war-club. The next minute she was sending two balls rolling across the polished floor.

"Oh, Hester!" exclaimed one of the other girls,

who were both some years her seniors, "Emma spent a couple of hours upon the floor this morning!"

"Never mind, Joan. Plenty of exercise is good for everybody, and I'll rub it up again myself, if you like;" and quite unconcerned she gave each ball a blow that sent it flying through the doorway on to the gravelled drive.

"Come along, Joan," said the sister who had not spoken before, "we will see if we cannot show her that the world may possibly be too much for her, even when it is represented by such insignificant persons as you and me."

The croquêt ground to which they followed Hester was in front of the house, commanding a lovely view, and one as rare in the district as it was lovely, for it had a wealth of wood and water, a charm lacking elsewhere for miles around.

The house itself was a sturdy structure of no particular period, apparently the product of a practical rather than an artistic mind, but looking large enough to promise perplexity to unwary guests. In reality, though built in times when prodigality as regards ground floors was more practised than at present, it was not inconvenient, perhaps because its successive occupiers had made but few attempts towards "improving" it.

The lawn was open, but on either side of the house

spread a grove of trees, not kingly oaks or heaven-aspiring elms, but still trees and shrubs that grew thickly enough to hide the stables and all the out-buildings belonging to the farm.

The girls stood for a moment beside the nail-studded central door, where some rising ground cut off the view on the right hand, but on the left it was no land-locked water that their eyes rested upon with satisfaction, but the glorious blue of the broad Atlantic.

A sunk fence divided the lawn from a meadow which was begirt by trees, and at the other end of which there were large entrance-gates, the posts being surmounted by nameless birds cut in granite, copies of the crest which had decorated the ancient Carnsews when they, like Hester, felt disposed to defy the world.

These stone representatives of the family's dignity must have been of unsurpassable hideousness when they were new, but time had laid a kindly hand upon them, and by softening colour and outline had rendered it possible for artistic Joan to regard them as ornaments, while to Mary and Hester they were objects of great admiration and affection.

The planting had been done by some one with a good eye for landscape gardening; but although the trees were small they were old, and even the girls themselves did not know to which of their ancestors

they owed these treasures which they valued so highly. The sea was not more than a quarter of a mile distant, but on the lower ground between it and the house there was a little clump of trees whose topmost boughs broke the waste of waters, but did not reach the lengthened curve of the horizon. Further off in the front there were little plantations too, behind which arose headland and hill glowing with reaches of waving corn or flecked with grazing sheep. In the distance there was neither tree nor bush to crown the rounded stretches of upland that spread themselves against the sky.

"I can play better here than I can at school," said Hester, as she made a first very successful stroke. "There one is not free to use one's lungs to advantage, as of course it would not be pleasant to have the policeman from round the corner appear at the gate, ready to do or die in the defence of somebody's life or property. I am not afraid of startling the people on board that steamer," she added, looking towards one that made its way up the channel, "or if I did they would not think of putting ashore to see what is the matter; and there is no other human habitation in sight."

"Nevertheless I hope you will not think it necessary to test the strength of your lungs at present," said Mary, as a peacock's shrill cry answered Hester's sounding laugh. "Aunt Emily is sure to

be taking her afternoon nap, and you know that wretched peacock's scream always wakes her at once."

Hester pitched her laughs in a lower key, and the game went on seriously, for the girls were too earnest to slight even a game of croquêt with each other.

At length the round of hoops was made, and Hester prepared to send her balls to the winning post, when a fat little spaniel lazily dragged himself across the drive and composedly lay down to enjoy the sunshine directly in her way.

"What impertinence, sir," she said, going over and shaking her head at him. "Jump up and go away this instant."

The dog languidly beat his tail against the ground in acknowledgment of the notice bestowed on him, but made no attempt to move.

There was a general laugh at this.

"Now, Sport, that is what I call adding insult to injury. Mary, I wish you would stir him up and run a race with him while I hit the post. I declare he will soon get apoplectic if we do not take strong measures."

"Thank you, you are very kind; but it is much too hot for such exercise."

So Hester gave Sport sundry pushes with her mallet, accompanied by a scolding delivered in the most amiable voice, which at last induced him to

retire to the drive. She then gave her blows, but, alas! she failed to bring her second ball to the post, and a minute later the clapping of her sister's hands announced her defeat.

"Start with the idea of conquering something a little less than the world!" exclaimed Mary.

"Why? It is a great deal better to have a brave heart and believe till the last that you can't be beaten, than to go doubting along all your way. Besides, I should not have lost the game, I dare say, if it had not been for that troublesome Sport—coming and disturbing me, and then going off to stretch himself on the gravel with the air of a martyr, making me feel reproached for turning him off the pleasant lawn. We will begin again."

However, just as she was about to strike her ball she threw up her head and, after listening a moment, exclaimed, "'Surely down the avenue of chestnuts I can hear a horseman ride!'"

"If by that high-flown language you mean to denominate those half-dead scrubby little blown-away oaks and sycamores that Papa has attempted to grow beyond the gates, your imagination must be pretty strong," said Mary.

"Thank God for it!" cried Hester, laughing, "as the servants always say in their letters after 'as it leaves me at present.'"

"I think it would be sensible of Papa if he were to

have them taken up again," said Mary. "Half of them will persist in dying every year; and none of them can ever get to any size."

"I would not have one of them taken up," cried Hester, passionately. "If four of them are alive in a hundred years' time it will be worth having had them planted over and over three or four times. It is our duty to provide something for coming generations, as so much as been done for us. Do you suppose these around sprung up like mushrooms? I only wish I knew who took that trouble for us. It is a pity they bear no stamp themselves to tell us, like the coin, 'Alfred commanded me to be made!'"

"Mrs. Markham, chapter X., sentence four, recollected from earliest infancy," called out a sententious voice behind her.

Turning quickly round she confronted a boy of fifteen, "Oh, Philip, when you have the place you will never cut down any timber, will you?"

"I sha'n't have any on it to take down, unfortunately," said her brother in a careless way; "but I don't know what I may do for firewood some Christmas."

"I *know* you never will," she exclaimed.

Crossing the meadow was now to be seen the "horseman" Hester had heard.

"Hullo, here's Samuel Truscott coming!" exclaimed Philip, going to the gate and holding it open

for the stranger, to whom he stretched up his hand in hospitable welcome.

A look of weariness passed over each girl's face, rapidly suppressed however, and Mary only hummed to herself, too softly to be heard by the gentleman: "There's a cloud in the sunniest day."

A man who had been working in the garden approached and led away the horse, while Mr. Truscott, with a jerky movement and sprightly voice, saluted the young ladies.

"Good afternoon, Joan. You're trying this croquêt? Good afternoon, Mary. And what kind of a hand do you make at it? Eh? Good afternoon, Hester. How she's grown!"

"Would you and Philip like to try a game?" suggested Joan. "We have just finished one."

"Eh? What do you say to it, Philip? I've no objection; you'll find me easy enough to beat, my boy. Ha, ha! I've never had anything to do with it. But there can't be any harm in trying, Joan, can there?"

"Certainly not," said Joan.

"There's no disgrace in being beaten when you've done your best, is there, Mary? The most clever of us can only do our best."

"I suppose so," doubtfully assented Mary.

Hester felt suddenly disgusted with her own sentiment, and turned to go indoors, but was stayed by—

"You surprise me, Hester. Indeed you do. I had no idea you had grown such a great girl. Quite a woman, eh, Joan?"

"I don't want to be a woman," said Hester, petulantly.

Both her sisters smiled a little. Hester had been permitted to choose the make of her own dresses for the coming season, and had shown a decided preference for very "grown-up" costumes.

"You can't help it, that is one thing, sure enough, eh, Philip? Shall we begin, my boy?"

The young ladies, thus dismissed, turned to the house, and were beckoned to one of the lower windows by an old lady.

"Come in to tea with me presently, my dears," she said.

"Thank you, Aunt," said Joan, adding, "Samuel Truscott is here."

"Yes, I saw him come." The same look of weariness was reflected from the old lady's face as had overshadowed her nieces' on their visitor's arrival.

CHAPTER II.

THREE GENERATIONS.

SOME explanation is necessary respecting Caervean and its inhabitants. The present owner of the house, and two or three adjoining farms, was a Mr. Samuel Carnsew, aged seventy-eight. This gentleman had farmed his own land with considerable practical ability until he reached the age of sixty. In his youth he had had dim visions of restoring the family to something of its ancient influence in the neighbourhood, and judging that the acquisition of wealth was the surest means of securing it, he decided not to marry till he was in what he considered a position to do so. Not, however, being of a daring nature, he attempted no bold speculations to gain his end, but contented himself with attending to his farm and living habitually well within his

income, a plan of life which had certainly failed to prove attractive to any of his ancestors for a considerable period; and although he did not exactly add field to field, he put aside one hundred pounds after another. Still he did not marry, and gradually the means changed to the end itself, and the desire for influence became a desire of obtaining more money.

A fall from his horse, followed by a lengthened illness, at last induced him to retire upon his savings. He reserved one end of his house, and let the rest and the land to his nephew, Edwin Carnsew, who accordingly brought his wife and children there to reside.

Unfortunately for himself and his relatives the elder gentleman had failed to use his talents in any way but farming, so they had withered and shrunk till they were insufficient to take in any outside interest. When he recovered his old measure of health and he had no longer an estate to look after, he found himself with absolutely nothing upon which to employ his time or thoughts but his garden and his bank-book. By degrees his man, who continued to live with him year after year, took almost all the planning and direction of the garden out of his hands. Nothing could deprive him of the resource of the pass-book, but the variations in that were now so rare and trifling compared to what they had once been, that

it was not the solace for his old age that might have been wished for, and in course of time such constant study of what was in reality quite plain produced a curious effect. The figures would assume a different meaning to him from the one they had for every one else.

In vain the maiden sister, who had always kept his house for him, urged more exercise and employment. Physically he was a strong man still, but all energy of will was lacking, and obstinacy alone remained. The house had not been separated into two, "for it is not like strangers living together, and of course when it comes to your father it will be only occupied by yourselves again," as Aunt Emily said to her nieces. Only each family had its own rooms.

Mr. Carnsew had but one other nephew, Samuel Truscott, the son of a sister who, somewhat late in life, had married, as her family considered, beneath her, although her husband was fairly well off. They had not ignored her, but the feeling that she had "done badly" had clogged the wheels of intercourse. Since the death of his parents, however, the son seemed anxious to enter into a more cordial friendship with his relations, who also appeared willing to let bygones be bygones, and now he too occupied a farm of his uncle's, distant some seven miles from Caervean.

Mr. Carnsew, having thought from the time that

Joan was seventeen that it was high time she was married, entertained rather vague views of her becoming Mrs. Truscott; which, however, he did not thrust unpleasantly forward in spite of his sister's remonstrances, which usually had the effect of producing active opposition on his part.

"Samuel Truscott!" she would exclaim; "what is the use of your thinking of such a thing as that? Why she is a sprightly young girl, and he is a comical—well, yes, I do call him a comical little man. And they have been altogether differently brought up. To say nothing of his being forty; old enough to be her father. She could never be happy with him, and that you could see if you had half the eyes you used to have."

"Why not?" the old man would ask, a little bewildered, but not a whit convinced. "He is quite a young man. What is forty?"

"Old enough to be her father."

"I don't see anything amiss in his looks."

"You could in his father's, and they are as much alike as two peas. And he has got the same little flinking manner with him. There is no dignity about him at all."

"I don't see it myself," says Mr. Carnsew.

"I should think not," says the old lady, who can be sarcastic once in a way, but it is lost upon her brother, who only remarks in a confused manner—

"What ?"

Mr. Truscott, being made acquainted with his uncle's wishes by sundry jokes of the old gentleman's, would probably have endeavoured to forward them, although he felt no particular affection for Joan; but he had quite sense enough to know that he might as well court the moon. So although he managed to weary her intensely whenever he came to Caervean, he never had the slightest intention of carrying matters farther.

His visits were always to "Uncle Samuel," never to his cousins; and this was so clearly understood, that although he might play a game of croquêt with Philip, the girls never hesitated a moment to accept the invitation to vacate their own house at tea-time, being sure enough that "Uncle Samuel's," and not their house, was where he would appear when the meal was ready.

When the girls entered their uncle's dining-room he rose and shook hands with each, although he had seen them before during the day. He was in the habit of making frequent doleful remarks concerning what he chose to consider the deplorable condition of his bank-book and his housekeeping expenses, but as yet these were confined to his sister's ears, and he made his nieces welcome, particularly Hester, whom he drew across the room with him as he made his way back to his seat by the now fireless grate,

and from force of habit stretched out one hand towards the ornamental shavings, while he still held her by the other and asked her questions as to how she was enjoying her holidays.

Hester answered him cheerfully, and presently he said he would drive her into the town the next day.

"You don't mean it, I hope, Samuel," said his sister. "You are not fit to drive. If you will go, I hope you will take William. You surely do not want to break the child's neck!"

"Why the child must have a treat to be sure! What nonsense you talk! I can drive well enough. You are not afraid to go with me, are you, Hester?"

"No," said Hester, truthfully. She would have trusted herself to anybody, having unbounded confidence in her own powers of getting out of trouble.

"My dear," said her aunt, "will you go out and tell Philip and Samuel that tea is ready?"

Hester repaired to the lawn. "I hope your game is near the end," she cried, "for Aunt Emily is waiting tea for you."

"What? tea!" exclaimed Samuel, throwing down his mallet. "I had no idea we had been so long, Philip. Come, we must go in now."

"How did you get on?" asked Hester.

"Oh, Philip is too much of a man for me."

"Well you are a beginner," said Philip. "You did not do badly for the first time."

"Men ought to be able to learn easily," said Hester. "They have learnt cricket and shooting, and all sorts of things that educate the eye and hand."

"But they have not learnt to play—croquêt, eh, Miss Hester?" said Mr. Truscott, with a rasping little laugh, and a sudden playful jerk towards her.

Hester made no reply. "'On heaven and on your lady call, and enter our enchanted hall,'" she said playfully, as she pushed open the door.

"Eh? What? Enchanted hall, Hester?"

Hester laughed.

"She is always talking nonsense," said Philip, with the superiority of a schoolboy, who of course always talked sense.

She turned and smiled very pleasantly at her brother. "What does it matter as long as we are happy?"

"You are right, Hester, no doubt," said her cousin. "How to be happy? That's what we want, no doubt, isn't it?"

Poor Hester felt at once that she wanted to be miserable, and had her wish gratified.

"Good afternoon, Uncle," said Samuel, on entering the dining-room with a walk indicative of anxious haste.

Aunt Emily was to him nothing more than his uncle's prudent housekeeper. Miss Carnsew was a

lady of stately appearance, above the middle height but not very tall, with soft white hair showing under a becoming cap of rich old lace. She was slight, and her dresses always seemed to fall in rich folds, there was nothing harsh about either the material or make of her clothing. To her nieces she was the embodiment of several generations of good living and careful training, and to be rude to "Aunt Emily" seemed not only an unpardonable offence, but an incomprehensible one. She went on quietly with her knitting till her nephew should notice her, but a deep flush spread over Joan's face, and Mary looked as if she found it difficult to restrain her tongue. Philip went to his aunt's chair and made two or three remarks to her. He would not—schoolboy as he was—have been guilty of such a breach of good manners as neglecting her, for all his uncle's money.

"And how are you, Uncle?" continued Samuel, with interest.

"Oh, much as usual, thank you. Take a seat, please."

But Samuel turned to Aunt Emily now, who shook hands with him and then took her place at the table, to which the others also drew near.

The dining-room in which they sat was, like the hall, wainscotted with black oak, and at one end there stood a handsomely carved side-board to match, evidently very ancient, looking as if it would

support a ton of beef and ale, but at the time condescending to hold up to view four or five massive silver tankards and a pair of branched candlesticks. Of modern plate there was very little in the house—Mr. Carnsew not having been at all disposed to part with his money in that way, and Miss Carnsew seeing "no necessity for *us* to trouble ourselves about having the last new thing."

A few half-length portraits relieved the walls, while above the curious mantelshelf there was a mirror, which was however so high up that it only reflected the ceiling and the heads of the gentlemen and ladies in the pictures.

The house had once been seized by a party of parliamentarians during the civil wars. The girls were of course zealous royalists, and Joan had conceived the idea of representing the traditional scene in a picture, which, when completed to her satisfaction, was to take its place in this room. In the very apartment a mother was to be figured begging the life of her unconscious child, lying in its cradle, from a group of soldiers.

"It is no use our waiting any longer for your father, my dear Joan, I suppose?" asked Aunt Emily.

"No, I expect, Aunt. He had not come indoors when we came away."

"I was just trying my hand with Philip at this croquêt," remarked Samuel to his uncle.

"Ah! I don't know anything about it. It has come into fashion since my time."

"Ah, yes. In your day, Uncle, people had something more serious to attend to than games. And so they have now. There's no mistake about that. I dare say it's a very nice amusement for people with independent means; but if people have got to work, they had better stick to work, that's my opinion. You can't do without it—I say you can't!"

The last part of the remark was not exactly made to his uncle, but delivered to the world in general, which might have been supposed, from the tone in which it was uttered, to be declaring that work was unnecessary for those who had to live by it. Dragging himself away forcibly, as it were, from the contemplation of those iniquitous persons who might be supposed to hold the opinion that "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," he remarked, with an ostentatiously transparent effort at cheerfulness:

"How Hester is grown, to be sure! She's quite a woman, I tell her, Uncle Samuel, and no tiny one either."

"I have been able to look down upon *him* for some time, anyhow," said Hester, in an aside to her brother. "I wish I was a dwarf," she added aloud.

"A dwarf, my dear?" said her uncle. "You have no need to wish for anything of that kind. You'll do pretty well as it is, I think."

"I hope you will not go thinking too much about your appearance, Hester, my dear," said Aunt Emily. "As people say, 'beauty is but skin deep,' and it is much more important that you should be good than good-looking."

"Well, I am sure I don't want to hear so much about it," pouted Hester. "I wish somebody would only talk about New Zealand, or the moon, or men's hats, or anything else."

The entrance of her father fortunately created a diversion, and the girl was left in peace.

"Oh, Samuel! I am glad to see you; you are quite a stranger."

"I am sorry to be late for your tea, Aunt Emily, but I really had no idea I was expected here till I got in a few minutes ago, and found the girls had all disappeared."

"Of course you had not," she said, graciously. "Never mind your being late if you will excuse our beginning without you."

The two cousins were very different in appearance and manners. One was a clever fool, the other a fool of a clever man. Mr. Carnsew was a few years the elder, but he scarcely looked so, the expression of his face being much the franker of the two, his hair the darker, and his manners so much more full of repose and ease. The contrast in attire was also striking. Mr. Truscott never indulged himself by

having his clothes well-made, and it certainly would not have suited his purpose to appear at "Uncle Samuel's" in even the best garments he had.

Mr. Edwin Carnsew was anything but a dandy, but he almost looked like one beside his cousin.

"And how is the world serving you?" he asked, cheerfully.

"Oh, I don't know, I'm sure, Edwin. There's nothing to boast of."

"Nor much to complain of, I dare say," said Joan.

"Oh, I don't know about that, Joan. Things don't look very prosperous."

Nothing ever did with Samuel when he was visiting his dear uncle, who, without speaking himself, turned his eyes with a fixed yet troubled look upon each as they spoke.

"We shall soon have harvest now—when do you begin?" asked Mr. Edwin Carnsew.

"Next week, I suppose, if the weather holds up," replied Mr. Truscott.

"So shall I. There is nothing to be gained by letting corn get too ripe. Scores of people make that mistake. How is it looking, generally, in your neighbourhood?"

"Well, I don't know that I can say much about other people's, but I've got a shocking bad crop of wheat in the West Park—shocking! The Under Town is rather better."

"Why, my man, Richard Daw, drove his wife out that way the other day to see a sister she had living somewhere thereabout, and he told me it was looking very well indeed," said his cousin.

"Ah! I can't help what he says. There's a little corner just by the road that mayn't look so bad, but when you get into it, it's a shocking bad field of wheat—that's all I can say."

"That land ought to carry good corn. What manure did you use? It depends so much upon that."

"Oh, I gave it plenty of manure. I'm afraid I shall never see the money back again that I have put in."

"Why, God bless my soul!" exclaimed Uncle Samuel, vehemently, "I have grown as fine wheat in that field as was ever grown in England, before these artificial manures came into fashion."

"So you may have. No doubt you have since you say so, Uncle. But all I know is I can't do it now. I've tried this, and I've tried that, and you may plough as deep as you like, and work at it, and slave at it, and you can't get a good crop."

"Well, the land must be changed somehow from what it was when I was a young man."

"How can that have happened?" asked Mary of her uncle.

"I don't know, my dear, but so it seems it has."

"Well, no man can work harder than I do, and yet I can assure you, Mary, I can hardly make a living out of it. I wouldn't say it out of the family, but I assure you it is a fact."

Again wrenching himself from his gloom for the sake of his friends, and his uncle in particular, he inquired in an interested tone after the condition of his cousin's crops.

"I am afraid it will be too dark to see properly by the time we have finished our tea," said Mr. Edwin Carnsew, "but of course you are going to stay the night, and to-morrow you shall see the finest ten acres of oats in the kingdom, if you like."

"Ah! Is it gone down?"

"Gone down! Why, no—it is so thick and strong that there is no room for that, I believe. Perhaps a mouse might make a path through it; nothing else could run through. It is some of Hallet's Tartar oats, and it answers uncommonly well with me."

"All your geese are swans, I am afraid, Edwin," said his aunt.

"Well, Samuel shall judge for himself if he has seen anything like it for the year."

Presently the ladies and Mr. Carnsew retired to the drawing-room, and the two farmers went off to inspect a calf which Mr. Carnsew had recently bought, and of which he was as proud as if he, like Aaron, had molten it himself. He returned still

glorifying it, and rejoicing in the sum of money he had expended on it, while Samuel echoed his praises in a minor key, at the same time remarking—

"That's a good bit of money to pay, Uncle Samuel. People didn't give such prices as that in your farming days, did they?—and, Uncle, *I* can't afford to do it now."

There followed a game of cards.

The Carnsews were noted whist players, and even Hester had been in the habit of playing so long, that she was considered quite a good enough partner to be portioned to her cousin; her father and Mary being their opponents.

"Hester is growing conceited at school," said her father, jokingly. "You and I will try to take a little of it out of her."

"That is no such easy matter, I am afraid," replied Hester, laughing.

"Eh! You like to be conceited, Hester?" asked Samuel.

"Yes," she said calmly. "I would not for anything be too humble."

"Eh! Ah, you don't quite mean all you say sometimes, young lady. That's it, isn't it, Hester?" said her partner, with the air of having discovered a great secret.

"No, I certainly always mean what I say; and to prove to you, Papa, that I do not mean you to beat

me, anyhow if I can help it, I am willing to stake a pair of gloves with you upon the results of the evening's play."

"Very well," said her father, "but you had better attend to your game, and not talk so much."

"Hester's getting a big schoolgirl, isn't she?" remarked Mr. Truscott to her father.

"Yes. Now she has been broken in to regular habits of learning lessons, I don't mean to send her to school after this term. She will be able to work at home with her sisters, I should think; don't you, Aunt Emily?"

"Yes, I hope so."

"And where is Master Edwin? I haven't seen him to-day," inquired Mr. Truscott.

"He goes back to school next week," said Joan, "and to-day he has gone over to say good-bye to the Daymans."

Mr. Samuel Carnsew contented himself with taking a seat between his nephews and watching their play, occasionally bestowing a word of commendation or reproof. Mr. Truscott played well, but he always played his own game, regardless of his partner's, and placed his cards on the table with an automaton-like jerky movement, which sadly irritated Mary.

Miss Carnsew busied herself with her knitting, and Joan produced a shawl of the finest wool that she was crocheting.

"And what are you doing, Joan? Netting? Always busy," remarked her cousin, approvingly.

"It is a shawl, not netting—crochet," answered Joan.

Another hand was played out.

"But, Joan, is it a shawl? Let me feel it. It is very light, isn't it? What is it made of?"

"Yes, it is light," allowed Joan. "The wool is very fine."

"Is it for yourself? Ah, that's your king of trumps, I see, Hester!"

"No, it is for Aunt Emily."

"But, Joan, it's so very hollow there can't be much heat in it, can there?"

"It is not meant to be worn out of doors in the depth of winter."

"But, Joan, there are a good many stitches in a thing like that, after all. It must require a good deal of patience, Uncle Samuel."

"I don't know, I am sure; I never tried," said Uncle Samuel, as if practice was the only ground for forming an opinion worth offering.

"Ah! but it does. At least, that's my idea. Joan's fingers are going fast, and yet she does not make much show."

"Not so much as Aunt Emily with her knitting needles," said Joan.

"Ah! I don't know about that, knitting is slow work, too."

"Come, come, not so much talking," urged Mr. Edwin Carnsew. "Attend to the thing in hand, please, Samuel. Talk about the sewing when we have done. Mary and I have won this game again."

"You will lose your gloves, Hester, my dear, I am afraid," said Miss Carnsew.

"Oh, I don't know that yet, Aunt!"

The next game was won by Mr. Truscott and his cousin, and Aunt Emily delayed the supper to give Hester the chance of winning her bet, but in vain.

"There is no good in our fighting against such cards, Hester," said Mr. Truscott, as trick after trick was lost.

"I do not want the gloves," said Mr. Carnsew.

"But you will have them, of course," said Hester, as it became certain that the game had again gone against her.

"No, indeed, I do not want them. I am very well stocked at present."

"But that can make no difference to my paying my debts," said Hester.

"But I will not have them."

"But you must, Papa, you know, if I buy them."

"It is no use your getting them. I will not wear them if you do."

"I have nothing to do with that," said Hester.

"My dear," said Aunt Emily, "if your father is

willing to forgive you, I don't see that you need get them."

"Oh! but I do, Aunt Emily."

"What will they do, Joan?" asked Samuel, enjoying the scene and rubbing his hands. "One or the other must give way."

"Why?" said Mary, "Hester will get them and put them in Papa's drawer, and he will let them stay there till they have gone spotty, that is all."

When Hester went to say good-night to her uncle, he put a half-sovereign into her hand, saying, "Here, child, you shall not come to my house to lose your money."

"Thank you, Uncle," said Hester, stooping down and giving him a hearty kiss.

His little present was a great relief to her, as she had already spent all her money and had been meditating which of her sisters she should borrow from to pay for her father's gloves, or whether it was possible that either of her brothers might be in a position to accommodate her.

CHAPTER III.

ROPES OF SAND.

"Questioning all things and yet half convinced.
Credulity were better."

COLLEGE BREAKFAST PARTY.

MR. EDWIN CARNSEW had lost his wife soon after the birth of his younger son. In many respects his daughters had scarcely felt their loss, so well had their great-aunt striven to supply a mother's place to them. But she was not a self-assertive person; and as her efforts had been more directed to guiding than controlling them, her nieces grew up with much more independence of thought and action than they could have had had their mother lived. Joan leant upon her aunt, the other girls loved and admired her, but loved still more to act for themselves.

When Hester left school, however, she became conscious of a mental need which there was nothing at hand to satisfy. At school the pressure of lessons had been so great that she had scarcely had time to think except by order, and during the holidays she had what she called "enjoyed herself," which excluded mental or physical toil.

On her return to Caervean finally, a change took place in her habits. Lessons developed into studies; the high pressure was relaxed and speculations began to float, at first dreamily, through her brain. She had hitherto unquestioningly received all doctrine or instruction administered to her as being true as a matter of course. Not very suddenly, but surely, perplexities crept in to disturb her head and heart. Then came lusty doubts, none the less powerful for being secret.

Mr. Vigars, the vicar, was an intimate friend of her father's, and Hester saw him often. He was a preacher who would grasp and keep the minds of his congregation fixed upon his discourse, which he was careful not to make too long. Hester did not find church-going dull, though the congregation was scanty and the pews were high. But the vicar was a clever man in other ways besides preaching. He was socially brilliant, and Hester soon found that he could make a sparkling joke and discuss the topics of the day from a standing-point which, if it was not

actually antagonistic, seemed to the girl considerably below the level of the one he preached from. He dealt with worldly questions as a keen-witted sensible man, who had had considerable experience of the world, not as a clergyman who had undertaken to wage perpetual warfare against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Hester presently began to criticise his sermons closely to herself, flashing upon them the light of his conversations, comparing the different inflections of his voice, and his turns of expression. His voice was rich and deep as if there was always more to be expressed than was said. In ordinary conversation it would make the piano at Caervean ring, and Hester soon suspected that little pauses were made that the echoes might not be lost upon the audience. Indeed, when she had once displaced him from a high position in her regard, there was no measuring the smallnesses of which she believed him capable. To her it seemed that if he believed what he preached so forcibly, he could have no choice but to live a life of rigid self-abnegation, active in all good works, and in rebuking folly; being no respecter of persons; in fact, to live a life exalted far above the petty ambitions or considerations of the world.

She wondered if any people really believed what they tacitly professed. She found it was impossible to doubt that the vicar was in earnest as he poured

forth words from the pulpit that thrilled her even while she tried calmly to analyze them. "Then there must be double-dyed hypocrites who not only deceive others but delude themselves into thinking they believe what they really cannot; for their lives could not be what they are if they believed in their souls what they think they do," she reflected.

Mrs. Vigars certainly believed her own interpretation of her creed heartily, and lived more up to her own standard, Hester thought, than any one else whom she knew; but then intense bigotry was wedded to her creed, and Hester's mind refused to allow the probability of souls being condemned by a just and merciful God to eternal misery, because, during their lives on earth they had chosen to worship Him with more or less deviation from a ceremonial which, it appeared to her, every one must plainly see had grown to be what it was gradually, and through the operation of man.

At length she began to doubt not only if Christianity might not be a gigantic bubble blown by time, but if the whole system of religion from which it proceeded was not a delusion. Without doubt there must be a Supreme Being—call Him Nature or God, or what you like—but what was known of Him? Did not the Bible accounts of the creation and other wonders read very like the "Arabian Nights"—the story of Joseph and the Exodus, for instance. Where

was the proof that it was not all one of those fables, in the production of which Eastern minds have been so ingenious.

Why had the age of miracles ceased? Surely the age of doubt had not passed! Would it not be as easy to believe in witchcraft and the modern spiritualism as in the wonders of the New Testament?

For help she turned to "Christian Evidences," and seeking bread she at once broke her teeth on a stone. She found that a faith was to be proved by the number of its martyrs. Why, then, surely she must become a believer in the fierce northern gods, a Moslem! What superstition, what heresy could not count up its martyrs? Were there not fanatics in every religion under the sun?

She did not arrive at this point in a few days or even weeks; nor at first did the subject engross very much of her thoughts. She divided her time between her desultory studies and her pleasures, requiring just as large a portion of the latter as she had done when a schoolgirl. During the winter she learnt to skate, and enjoyed it heartily; she also rode, and rode well, soon becoming a skilful and daring horsewoman. But a gloom was gradually stealing over the household of which she was conscious, although at first she did not comprehend it, and thought it was only in herself. She pondered, hesitating for some little time as to what course she should pursue.

Should she boldly say, "I don't disbelieve your religion, but neither do I believe it?" There did not appear to be anything to be gained by that course. It would only make her friends miserable about her; and her position being purely negative, she had no desire to bring other people to the same point. If doubts led the way to something higher and better it would be different, but she certainly did not feel herself another Joan of Arc, to whom revelations would be vouchsafed. She did not wish to see the faith of others upset; indeed, she would have been thankful to have had her own doubts dispelled.

Besides, it was almost impossible to open such a subject to her friends. They would be intensely distressed, and already other shadows were clouding them. But might they not be able to help her? Was there any faith with which she could come in contact that had life enough to kindle her own? She did not think so, yet she would give them a chance of discussing it with her.

Instead of going to church on Sunday afternoons she stayed at home, and, as she knew would be the case, her action did not fail to be remarked.

Her aunt and sisters discussed it together, but thought her too old for interference, although Miss Carnsew did make a few remarks to her on the wisdom of keeping up good habits.

Hester's excitement was great on meeting Mr.

Vigars the next day, and she felt rather disappointed to find that there was not a shade of difference in his treatment of her. Surely he ought to have tried to find out why she had altered her habit, or at least have shown her in some way his disapproval of it!

Summer had come again, but it had not brought a return of brightness to the family at Caervean; indeed, it only served to make the change more apparent. The croquêt ground was deserted. Joan and Mary read a great deal more than they had before, and Hester wandered alone about the cliffs or on the beach.

Mr. Edwin Carnsew had joined in one or two speculations which, instead of returning the enormous profits promised, not only could never find any dividends to be shared, but managed to swallow up much of the capital subscribed.

His daughters might seem to be little affected by this at the first; they had never had much spending money, and could not well do on less; but the effect it had upon the elders of the family rebounded forcibly against them. Their father, who was usually full of conversation, became silent, and the utter stillness at meals was very oppressive.

The girls rarely spoke of the loss to each other.

"We can do nothing but wait and hope that things will improve," said Joan, and Mary would agree with

her, though she would occasionally express herself more impatiently than her sister.

Still, Joan kept the housekeeping expenses at the lowest possible amount, although she reflected that the trifling sum she could save was but a drop in the ocean of her father's expenses. Poor Miss Carnsew felt her nephew's losses almost more than he did himself, and with them and her brother's growing irritability, began to look quite careworn.

"It is no good troubling about Papa's money, Aunt," said Joan one day. "It is very provoking, of course. But we have the consolation of knowing that we can never come to want."

"You will never come to want, my dears; my money is sufficient to prevent that; and though it is not a great deal, I shall take care that your father cannot spend it."

"And of course, with Caervean, we can never even be poor. I should not be sorry, though, if Uncle had tied it down to Philip," said Mary.

"My dear, it never does to count too much on anything of that kind."

"But Papa would never spend Caervean, I am sure," said Hester.

"It is not his to spend yet, remember."

Hester was startled, and, looking at her aunt, saw an expression on her face which frightened her. What could her aunt mean by such an odd remark?

How could they help counting on Caervean? The place would be her father's, of course—it might be almost said to be his now.

As the weeks passed, and their father recovered some of his old cheerfulness, declaring, "It was done now, and must be made the best of: there would be bread and cheese enough, anyhow," his aunt grew more and more distressed, and Mary said hotly that "It was all very well to talk like that; but she, for one, was not fond of bread, and hated even the smell of cheese."

Hester's staying at home from church became an institution which called for no remark. The excitement which her doubts had first produced in her mind gradually wore itself out, as nothing came of them. Even the longing to have some one who was not blind take her by the hand and place her feet on firm ground, settled into hopelessness, and then into a dull indifference, broken now and then by a throb of pain which was simply a yearning after truth, not a seeking after it, and was more a physical sensation than a mental effort.

Her aunt wished her to spend her Sunday afternoons with her uncle; and she did so, although they often sat together without talking.

She had always been a greater favourite of Mr. Carnsew's than her sisters were; and now she was very sorry for him. She thought of him constantly.

He was evidently getting into a crabbed and troublesome old age. It was a miserable evening after a long day's journey. Hester did not like being with him—his company could give pleasure to no one; but her pity for him was so great that she carried out her task cheerfully.

Miss Carnsew usually asked her nieces to spend one evening with her every week, now generally choosing days when their father was absent from home, for he and his uncle had lately been impatient with each other, and she thought it was better that they should not meet too often. Mr. Carnsew had said some bitter things to his nephew, who, having always paid his rent regularly, and having had few favours from his uncle which other tenants would not have had, did not acknowledge his right to lecture him at will.

One afternoon Hester was in the drawing-room with Mr. Carnsew, when, in rising from his seat, he nearly upset a little stand holding old china, with his stick, which he always kept at hand now.

"Oh, Uncle!" exclaimed Hester, trembling with fright, "you almost knocked over that old coffee-pot of Aunt Emily's! It would have been dashed to pieces if it had come against the fender. What would Aunt have done if it had been broken? You are welcome to break every new thing in the house if you like, but not anything that is old, please."

"Aunt Emily's? Why the coffee-pot is mine, I believe. I don't see why she keeps it sticking up here in the way. It would be better in a cupboard. I don't see anything so particular in it. I don't mind giving it to you since you seem to think so much of it."

"Oh, thank you, Uncle. I think I will put it in a safer place," and she moved it to a more solid stand.

Miss Carnsew and Joan and Mary came into the room.

"My dear Hester, where is your work?" said her aunt; "I do not like to see you sitting idle. It is always well to be able to do anything, and best of all to learn never to waste your time."

"They used to say when I was young, 'Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do,'" said Mr. Carnsew, slowly; "but I don't know if 'tis true. The child's quite as well as other folks as far as I can see."

"I expect Hester has no fancy work that she likes to bring out," said Joan.

"Well, when I am not at my studies I need to be out of doors, so I have no time for sewing," explained Hester, laughing.

"When you are not out of doors you need to be at your studies, would be a more correct statement of facts, I think," said Mary.

"Well, my dear, you can surely find something to

do. I will excuse it if it is not anything very fine. I dare say your father has some stockings to be mended."

Hester went off, and speedily returned with a kitchen-cloth to be hemmed.

"What is it, my dear? Can't you be left in peace?" said her uncle.

"Of course, Uncle, I must sew," replied Hester.

"It is a pity you have not been out to-day, Samuel," said Miss Carnsew. "It is a lovely day. You have been talking for the last fortnight about going down to see John Curtiss about that piece of ground he wanted to have on lease. It will be a nice little walk for you, and will do you good."

"I think it's you who have been talking about it for the last fortnight, Emily. It is very hard if a man may not stay in his own house if he likes."

"But, Samuel, you ought to have given the poor man an answer one way or the other when he came up to inquire about it, instead of saying he was not to come up again, but you would go down and see him. It is not fair; and of course he wants to begin his cottage now the days are long."

"What have I to do with his cottage and the short days?" said the gentleman.

"You know when you have had anything built yourself you always choose to have it done in the summer."

There was silence for a minute; then one of the girls said something on another subject. Presently Mr. Carnsew rose and rang the bell.

"Jane, I want my gloves," he said to the servant. "I suppose I may as well go; I shall have no peace," he added, generally.

"Wouldn't you like Hester to go with you?" suggested his sister.

"No, no! Poor Hester's got her task to do. She'll be in trouble about that again if she goes with me."

After her brother's departure, it became evident that Miss Carnsew had something to say, and did not know exactly how to begin. Her nieces got rather nervous.

"What is it, Aunt?" asked Joan.

"My dear, I was only going to say that I hope you girls will always be very polite to your uncle. I know that he does not always say the most pleasant or reasonable things; but we must remember how old he is getting—it is a great pity he had that fall from his horse, he is not at all like he was—and bear with him patiently. It was yesterday, I think, that Mary spoke quite sharply to him. I do not mean to say, my dear, that he was not very trying; but he does not see that himself, and he does not forget your remark."

"I don't wish him to, Aunt. I never heard any one so unreasonable as he was."

"Well, my dear, you are young to correct him, you know. And it does no good. In fact it does harm. It only makes him angry, and I believe he broods over it. I do not wish to blame your father to you," she went on, after pausing a minute; "but it is natural that your uncle should be annoyed with him—I cannot help being so myself. I do not mean simply about these unlucky speculations. They are provoking enough, and nobody who has a family ought to risk money in such a way. The men who get up those kind of things are perfect catch-pennies. I wonder that a well-informed man like your father does not see that anything that is to give such great profits would not need to be offered to the public. I believe he only entered into these schemes in the hope of replacing money that he has lost by his farming and other ways. He has farmed this place very extravagantly, laying out a great deal more upon it than he ought to have done if it had been really his own, which, of course, was utterly reckless on any other person's land. I have no doubt that some fields are worth twice as much as they were when your uncle gave up farming; but then they have cost your father more than the extra value, and he has improved the estate regardless of a prospect of seeing his money back again. He ought to have waited till he had the place in his hands, for he has no more security than a tenant-at-will."

"I suppose not," said Joan; "but of course he always knew that the estate would be his, and I expect few men with that knowledge would farm it exactly as they would without."

"He should have waited till it actually was," repeated Miss Carnsew.

"Perhaps he has not sunk so very much here after all, Aunt. If he has spent a lot of money he has had some very good crops, you know."

"I know he has, but they have not done anything for him. I hear of an enormous crop of oats: but are there any sold? No; the horses eat them all. The horses are a great deal of their time fetching oil-cake and maize and manure: but what cattle or sheep are sold? Next to none. It is impossible that it should answer."

"I cannot see, anyhow, where Uncle Samuel can find any excuse for grumbling," said Mary. "If Papa refused to pay him any rent because he could not get it out of the farm, he might have a shadow of reason on his side."

"And substance, too, I think. As it is, your uncle naturally thinks that Edwin may not go on more prudently when he has the estate. You see he has lost his confidence in him, and is ten times as willing to trust to Samuel Truscott's judgment. *He* takes very good care never to contradict his uncle or offend him in any way. Elderly people do very curious

things sometimes, so I hope you will be careful not to irritate your uncle."

"But, Aunt, to hear Samuel talk, one would think he did no better by farming than Papa does," said Joan.

"Your father talks as if Caervean were the richest spot in creation, and yet your uncle knows he grows poorer every year upon it. Samuel talks as if his farm was worth next to nothing, and yet by dint of careful management he manages to make a living out of it."

Hester felt quite sick at the bare idea her aunt had conjured up. It was impossible not to understand what she meant; but it was also impossible that there could be the least foundation for her fears. As she had said, elderly people did curious things sometimes, but they also took curious fancies into their heads. It *was* impossible that Caervean should not be her father's, and then Philip's. All the shadowy line of ancestors she was so fond of picturing to herself started up to confront this doubt and declare that Caervean should not go out of the name, out of the line. Samuel Truscott at Caervean! Such a thing could never be. The very stones of the place would cry out at the desecration!

Her sisters had begun a dismal conversation about some one who was ill in the parish, and Hester slipped away to her own room to puzzle over the

bewildering idea. It was no possibility—she would not for a moment allow that, only the wildest of wild notions that could have flitted across her aunt's brain. She believed there were people in the world who took a positive pleasure in forecasting evil, even to people of whom they were fond. Had not her aunt allowed that her father had even spent a lot of his own money upon the place? She certainly would not have hesitated to do the same had she been in his place, for of course the estate was his by every right, after his uncle's days. The law might leave her uncle free to do as he pleased with it; but no man but a madman would dream of using his power in such a case. Her uncle would never think of doing such a thing; he was only a little cross because he could not help feeling that he was getting old, and he wanted something to grumble at besides himself. Had he not that very afternoon shown his affection for herself by giving her an old family coffee-pot? She returned to the drawing-room with restored confidence, and went on with her sewing till her uncle came in again.

"It is very pleasant out of doors, Samuel, isn't it?" said his sister.

"I dare say it is, for those that have the heart to enjoy it," returned Mr. Carnsew, making his way to the sofa where Hester sat.

"Oh, Samuel!" exclaimed the lady, getting a back

view of him, "where have you been? The back of your coat is covered with whitewash and cobwebs."

"There can't be anything there that was not there when I went out. I have not been anywhere except into John Curtiss's kitchen and into an old fowls'-house he has, to look at some new hens he has got from somewhere; so I can't have got anything about me."

"Oh yes, you have. You really are not fit to sit down like that. Do go out and let Jane brush your coat."

"I sha'n't do any such thing. How long will my coat last if I am always having it brushed? I shall be wanting a new one directly, and you will be the first person to tell me of it."

"Have you arranged about the ground?"

"No. I wanted to hear what Samuel has to say about it. I was thinking I would send William over to ask him to-morrow morning, and then I can let Curtiss know in the evening."

"Why, Samuel, the time of a man and horse will be worth just as much as that little scrap of waste ground. I should think you could decide a little matter like that without consulting anybody."

"I dare say; but I don't know about that: they say two heads are better than one;" and Mr. Carnsew sunk into silence till he was again aroused by Hester's remarking to him—

"They are going to have a new lifeboat at Salford, at last, Uncle. Have you heard anything about it?"

"Somebody did say something to me about it, I think, my dear."

"I am glad of it," said Joan; "it was high time."

"I dare say it is a fine enough thing," allowed Mr. Carnsew; "but if people had got so much to make them miserable as I have, when they were wrecked they would not care much if there was any lifeboat or not."

"How can you talk like that!" said his sister. "You have everything that you can want, and it is ungrateful to God for His benefits to grumble just because we are getting old and frail, and cannot enjoy things as we used. We must expect that, if we live beyond the Bible age of man, you know."

"I don't know so much about that. It appears to me one must expect to have to put up with a good many things one did not think likely when one was younger."

Hereupon Mr. Carnsew again staggered to his feet with some difficulty, and left the room, returning in a few minutes with his coat brushed.

"There is somebody coming up the drive, Hester, my dear," he said, standing a minute before the window. "Who is it? I have not got my spectacles on."

"Yes, you have," said Hester, laughing, and

getting up to look out of the window too; "but you have pushed them on to the top of your head, and they are standing up there instead of being before your eyes."

"So they are," said Mr. Carnsew, with a little chuckle too, putting up his hand to feel.

"It is Cousin Samuel," said Hester, a little damped down again.

"Eh? Samuel, did you say? Is there anybody there to take his horse, I wonder. I must go and see," and he bustled out of the room once more.

"Your uncle is always worse after Samuel has been here," said Miss Carnsew. "And now he scarcely ever gets time to recover from one visit before there is another. I really cannot help wishing he would not come so often."

Presently the uncle and nephew entered, and Mr. Truscott greeted the ladies with the same jerky air of determined cheerfulness at any cost to himself. "I am glad to find Uncle Samuel looking so well this afternoon, Aunt Emily," he said, with desperate liveliness. "He came out of the house quite briskly, indeed he did. I can assure you I was surprised."

"Yes, it must do every one good to get out of doors in such weather as this."

"I had not heard how he was for several days, so I thought I would just ride over and see."

"And you came in a lucky time," said Uncle

Samuel. "I was wanting to see you about a piece of ground John Curtiss wants to have on lease to build a cottage. What do you wish to have done?"

Hester's blood almost froze in her veins. What could it matter to Samuel Truscott what was done at Caervean? It should have been her father's business to give an opinion.

The answer came in a slightly deprecating voice. "Well, Uncle, it's not exactly for *me* to advise *you;* but, since you ask my advice, I should say he might just as well have it? It is that little waste piece, isn't it?"

"Yes. Very well then. I will send William down to let him know this evening."

"And where is your father to-day, Joan?" asked Mr. Truscott, breaking in upon the dead silence that ensued.

"There is a magistrates' meeting to-day at Salford," replied Joan.

"It is a pity people cannot stay at home and attend to their own business," said Mr. Carnsew, "instead of mixing themselves up in other people's."

"But, Uncle, somebody must attend to that business, you know," said Joan.

"Yes," replied Samuel, with considerable emphasis, "*somebody* must do it; but the difficulty is nowadays to get the right man in the right place, isn't it? At least, that is what it appears to be to me."

Joan did not answer, but Mary said, "There have certainly been diversities of gifts given to men—to one man craft, to another candour."

She then rose and left the room, to the great relief of her aunt. Hester would have gone too, but her anxiety chained her to the spot: she was eagerly noting each remark of her uncle's and cousin's.

However, the conversation turned on indifferent subjects, which only interested her from their negative bearing on that which was so absorbing to her. With that youthful sense of self-importance which springs from having forcible feelings, and not having yet made the discovery of their utter insignificance to other people, she formed a little plan of plainly letting Samuel know how she, at least, regarded the right of her father and brother to Caervean.

In the evening, when her brother Philip had joined them in the drawing-room, she, without anything leading up to it, startled everybody and called their attention to her by exclaiming, "Phil, I have got a wedding present for you!"

"That is rather looking ahead, I should say—eh, Hester?" said Mr. Truscott, with terrible jocoseness. "Master Phil will have to get through a good bit of work at college, and make some little way after that, I should think, before he can think much about marrying. I have heard that barristers don't always make fortunes in a week."

"Thank you, on behalf of the future Mrs. Carnsew and myself," said Phil, with mock gravity. "But I think you would have been wiser to have deferred your purchase till I have at least decided upon the lady. Probably the money would have increased cent. per cent."

"Oh, it is for you, not your wife, for it belongs to the family, and of course must not go out of it. Uncle Samuel gave me that coffee-pot this afternoon —you don't mind, do, you Aunt Emily?—and remember, Joan and Mary, that whatever happens to me, that is my wedding present to Phil. I hope your wife will value it and take care of it as she ought."

Aunt Emily, indeed, did not mind; she was only too glad that her brother should give his nieces anything.

"You will forget you have given it to me when you get married yourself," said Phil.

"Yes, I expect, if she thinks so much of it now," said Mr. Truscott.

"Indeed I shall not. Uncle, you do not think I am not grateful for your present, I hope, because I have given it to Phil. You see it is a part of the house, so I could not possibly take it away from him. It must go to the heir."

"I don't care what you do with it, my dear. You are welcome to change it for a brooch with the next Jew who comes to the house, if you like."

"No, I would not do that for anything. I would rather never possess the tiniest article of jewellery for all my life than do such a thing."

A successive slamming of distant doors announced the approach of Mr. Edwin Carnsew. He came in bringing with him an air of having come from and been in contact with the outer world, which Samuel had quite failed to do: the only world he had come from was himself, and unluckily he could not leave that behind him.

Standing there, Mr. Edwin Carnsew certainly looked the prosperous man of the three—perhaps he was, in mind and body. He had had some little commission to execute for his aunt, and explained to her what he had done.

"Thank you. You would like some tea, wouldn't you? I will have some carried in."

"No, thank you. I don't want anything before supper. I had some dinner directly before I came away from Salford. I have been having a look at the new lifeboat. I should think she is a great improvement on the old one."

"I should have thought they could have made the old one do," said Uncle Samuel. "They are costly things, I have always understood."

"So they are, of course. But they have made the old one do too long, I should say. I am sure there ought to be the best that can be got for money on

such a coast as this. I hope she will never have such a terrible accident as her predecessor had."

"But the crew had a glass or two too much before they went out, hadn't they?" remarked his cousin.

"I don't know the ins and outs of that affair," replied Edwin. "The launch is to be on Wednesday. You ought to go and see it, Uncle. It will do you good to get out, and mix a little with other people."

"Oh, I don't know; I have no heart for going out of doors, somehow."

"Don't you think Uncle Samuel is looking capital to-day? He was quite brisk when I came," said Mr. Truscott.

"Just the same as usual, I think," said his cousin. "He behaves like a man who does not wish to get better. His doctor tells him to get out of doors as much as he can, and to occupy his mind; and he carries out that by dragging himself from his bed downstairs to an easy-chair, and back again."

"Stop, stop, not quite so fast, if you please," exclaimed the patient. "Nobody would wish to be like I am if they could help it."

"Then, Samuel," said his sister, "why don't you try to get better? Why don't you do what you are directed to? Sometimes you take your medicine for two or three days, and then, directly you feel that it is doing you good, you leave it off."

"Well, the doctor told me to be careful not to take

two doses instead of one, so I suppose there is poison in it, and I do not mean to take too much."

"No one suggests your doing that; you need not take a double dose any the more because you are taking it regularly. What is the good of consulting a doctor at all if you do not mean to do what he advises?" asked Mr. Edwin Carnsew.

"I expect everybody feels what is best for himself in such cases," said Mr. Truscott.

"Then let them blame themselves, not Providence and the doctor, if they are ill. It is acting like a child."

CHAPTER IV.

TOWARDS THE VERGE.

"Is it peace, or war? Civil war, as I think, and that of a kind
The viler, as underhand, not openly bearing the sword."

MAUD.



ESTER, when she reached her room for the night, seated herself on the floor in a perfect abandonment of perplexity. Had she been seared with a hot iron she could scarcely have recoiled with greater horror than she had felt on hearing her uncle's openly-uttered reproach that her father did not attend properly to his own affairs, and her cousin's as open backing of the same.

"I do not wonder at Queen Mary saying the word 'Calais' would be found written on her heart after her death," she thought, feeling that she could understand the hopeless tragedy of the unhappy queen's

despair at her loss. The girl was full of mute indignation—not crying out, even to herself, against any person, but bitterly angry that the idea should have entered any one's head that her father's place could by any legal adjustment belong to any other man. Sir Walters and Sir Philips—half mythical but wholly venerated personages—stalked across her room with statelier bearings and nobler countenances than they had most probably been graced with in the flesh. For the first time Hester felt that some one or other of her ancestors had been to blame not to have tied down Caervean, but instantly checked herself: no rational man could be expected to foresee the possibility of a Carnsew's being ousted for Samuel Truscott! Her uncle—her poor, poor uncle—would have scouted the idea in his sane days. Her sorrow for him was without measure. To have such a notion clearly proved him to have lost his right mind. She knew that he had hurt his head in that terrible fall he had had before she was born. How terrible would be his feelings if he could only see himself for a moment as others saw him: if a lightning flash could only for an instant gleam between the thick thunder-clouds which darkened his intellect! There was nothing noble or venerable about this old age; it was only pitable, abject, miserable. How could people wish to live to that state and cling to life as they did? It would be a thousand

times better to die in one's prime—nay, in one's youth—than to live to a condition which was only not despicable from being heart-wringing, and where pity was driven to find itself more akin to disgust than love!

Of course her uncle would never do what her aunt dreaded. This was only a nightmare that would be shaken off again, but it was very terrible while it lasted.

"I never wish to have such a shock again in my life," she thought; "I should not wonder if my hair has turned white," and she got up, feeling a languid curiosity, but no anxiety, to look in the glass. The colour of one's hair was a trifle compared with the ownership of Caervean. It was apparent, however, that the hair had not suffered.

"Mr. Carnsew of Caervean," she said aloud, to reassure herself: of course that *must* be what her father would be.

It was not the reflection that without Caervean there would be poverty in store for her family that troubled her; she barely glanced at that, though she did think that for Phil to be a barrister and for Edwin to go into the army would require money.

She had often congratulated the Carnsews in a body, defunct and alive, that her father had two sons: had there been but one there would have been a risk of the line ending.

Even if her uncle was vexed with her father, what grounds could he think he had for putting Phil and Edwin aside?

He would never do so, and she called herself stupid for thinking of it. Had she not always been told that he valued the family name and honour as much as she did herself? She had not observed it in him, but she supposed it was not the custom of age to talk of those things as youth and middle life did. Yet, might it not be the custom for age to really change in those ideas? Did not the very fact of her uncle's giving her the coffee-pot prove that he did not value the old china as she did, as ancestral relics, to be strictly handed down in the family?

If he did leave the place to Samuel—terrible idea that would haunt her though she scouted it—there was but one thing to be done. Joan would be compelled to marry her cousin after all; and though there was no hope that she would ever be able to persuade her husband to do justice and resign his power, she would have to bring up her children to feel that Caervean was really their Uncle Philip's, and that when it came into their hands it must be returned to its rightful owner. It would be a dreadful sacrifice for Joan, a daily, hourly sacrifice for many years in all probability, for Samuel was still only forty-four! It would certainly be a most terrible act of self-abnegation, for there would be no getting a

moment's relief from year's end to year's end! And yet there was no other way. Poor Joan!

Perhaps, however, she herself would do as well to carry on her train of thoughts in bed as out—she was getting very stiff and cold. Of course there was no chance of her going to sleep for the night; still she might as well get into bed. When there, however, the warmth and sense of repose so affected her, that the next thought of which she was conscious was, "How fine the morning is!"

The prospect did not look so threatening in the bright, clear sunshine as it did in the dimly-lighted gloom of the night before. "I was looking through the very greyest of grey spectacles," she thought.

So she began to hum the air of "The rising of the lark," and then abruptly stopped and went on to—

> "My wife shall dance and I will sing, so merrily pass the day,
> For I deem it one of the wisest things to drive dull care away."

But dull care was not to be so easily dismissed. He had leaped up behind her, and held on with a most pertinacious grasp. "This will make an old woman of me if it lasts long," she thought, when she went down to breakfast. And in the afternoon she had no inclination to go for her usual walk, and thoroughly astonished her sisters by asking, with striking meekness of manner, if there was not any little sewing she could do.

The sitting-room that the girls used at Caervean was small, but very cheerful, and showed individual thought in its appointments.

The fireplace was old-fashioned, with Dutch tiles of sentimental and comic designs, while around was a richly carved mantelpiece in wood, without, however, any shelf for ornaments. Above hung an old circular mirror framed in ebony. The walls were painted an olive green; the door, a darker shade of the same colour, had sprays of apple-blossom brightening each panel, which the deep skirting matched with a trailing design of the same. This was Joan's own handiwork.

There were a few water-colours, some brackets and bookshelves, designed and made by Joan and Mary; a folding-screen of cream-coloured silk, painted with groups of Chinese figures, also Joan's work. The chairs were not numerous nor alike, but there were weeks of close employment in some of the cushions, fine silk embroidery, and yet finer lace.

Of ornaments there were but a few, but those few were good. The floor was of polished oak, plentifully furnished with skin rugs. The chief feature of the room was the window, or rather windows, for there were three grouped in one, reaching across nearly the whole width of the room, and commanding a wide extent of ocean and headland, meadow and cornfield.

With the development of this room from its original chrysalis stage to its present butterfly condition Hester had had nothing to do; she had never ventured to pass an opinion upon the banishment of some articles of furniture and the transformation of others, but she had an almost sacred veneration for it. She had watched with enthusiastic admiration its growth under her sisters' hands, and she cherished a pride in it which she would never have felt in the most expensively furnished drawing-room in which the furniture had been simply bought.

How clever her sisters had been over it! But that of course was not extraordinary, after all. Where should original ideas and a quick perception of peculiar beauties be looked for if not in the descendants of a lengthy list of intelligent well-bred gentlemen? So she thought to herself, as she sat coiled up on one of the side window-seats, and instead of keeping her eyes upon her sewing let them wander from the sparkling waters of the bay to the "mighty first mandarin," who was luxuriously crossing one of the screen panels, and speculated upon his life in his own celestial country. Her sisters, seated together in the central window, were not talking much. Joan was sewing, Mary reading *The Spectator*, slowly turning over the leaves and making an occasional remark, or now and then reading a sentence aloud.

"I see this euthanasia discussion is not ended yet!" Hester heard her say at length.

"I wonder if other papers are taking it up too," said Joan. "From the number of letters in *The Spectator* we might suppose it to be one of the important, burning topics of the day."

"I don't know. I have not seen anything about it anywhere else."

"Euthanasia! What a funny word! What is the meaning of it?" asked Hester, from her corner.

Her studies did not include the correspondence in *The Spectator*.

"I should say it is 'killing, no murder,' in the minds of its advocates—should not you, Mary?" answered Joan.

"Yes, I suppose you may call it killing, but by no means murder. You may term a spade a spade, but on no consideration should you forget yourself and horrify delicate ears by calling it a 'showl.'"

"What *do* you mean?" asked Hester. "Is it somebody wanting to abolish capital punishment?"

"Not that at all," said Joan. "You know what 'hari-hari' is, don't you?"

"The Japanese horrible 'happy release,' you mean?"

"Yes. So euthanasia would be called by some people a happy release. The operation, however, need not be performed on one's self, and is to be con-

ducted in a much more refined and decent manner than is the Japanese custom."

"In other words, people are advised to shuffle off this mortal coil by suicide. There's no preathing equal to practice—how is it then that there is anybody to write in its support?" asked Hester.

"Of course it is only to be practised upon people who have little or nothing to expect from this life but weary waiting and pain," said Mary.

"I do not exactly understand now," said Hester. "Give me an instance, will you?"

"There is old Louisa Ivey. You know she has been lying in bed for twenty years; and there are paralytic people who can never do anything for themselves and must be a helpless burden upon others; and some people too, you know, have horribly loathsome and painful diseases which are quite incurable."

"But it always seems to me," said Hester, "that those of all people are the ones who cling to life and are anxious to preserve it by any means; old people who have worn out their pleasures, and have nothing but pain and imbecility before them. Do you remember old Mrs. Vaudry? I was only a child when she died, but I heard the servants say that when the doctors told her nothing could cure her she would try anything, whatever any old woman would suggest, and charms even; and yet she would come to church

in new clothes. I remember now how, after I had heard the women talking of it, I saw her in a light new bonnet with feathers, and the feeling of horror I had, as if there was something uncanny about any one who thought so much about their clothes in the face of death. She would not believe she must die, I suppose."

"That is not so much to be wondered at," said Mary. "Every year confirms the habit of living, and age is proverbially conservative and opposed to change even if it is obviously for the better."

"But if there is nobody to carry out the idea, what is the good of preaching it?" asked Hester.

"There might be one here and there, I suppose; and some people carry it a step farther, and would have them put quietly aside without giving them much choice in the matter."

"Oh! That is a different thing. Where would they stop?"

"You may well ask," said Mary. "That would be a question that would become interesting to everybody if there was to be a yearly clearing off of the useless members of society, like the drones."

"I do not think it would need to disturb many," said Joan, "for I suppose every one is useful in some way as an example or warning—hard to see in many cases as I allow it to be."

"Well, I expect no one seriously ever thought of

going beyond unhappy incurables. I suppose they consider it one of the first problems to be worked out in the solution of the great social sum of how to make one bear his own burden and no part of anybody's else. Youth and freshness must not be sacrificed at the altar of age or infirmity, any more than capital is to be benefited by labour."

"Perhaps there is something more important than youth or freshness to be gained from the exercise of patience and self-denying love," said Joan. "I have seen a careworn, deeply-lined face with far greater depth of beauty in it than it ever had when its skin was smooth and its complexion brilliant."

"How about insane persons?" asked Hester, abruptly.

"Why, Hester, don't speak like that, please. You really startle any one talking back there out of sight," said Mary. "I do not know how they would fare."

"I think they are worse than people can be who are simply diseased in body," said Hester.

"What do you think, Joan?" said Mary. "If this theory ever grows into practice, are we to consider it as another step gained on the steep ladder of civilization? Or will it prove that we have reached the top, and are descending again towards those delightful savages whose economical souls revolt at the idea of their enemies being able in any of their

raids to profit by the worn-out warriors of their tribe, and, to make all sure, eat up their fathers themselves?"

"Mary, that is a too horrible way of putting it," said Hester, very quietly.

"I have never read of the Great Physician, who went about healing those who were bowed down with a spirit of infirmity, that He advised for any that they should be put out of their misery in any such fashion," said Joan; "and I think the closer we can follow His teaching the nearer we shall get to perfect civilization."

The sun had gone behind a cloud and the sea had turned a dull grey; there was no broad gleam of light upon the waters; here and there a wave reflected a stray ray for a moment which only made the surrounding gloom more noticeable.

Joan and Mary went on talking to each other, but Hester took no further part in the conversation. Presently there was silence. No one had spoken for some minutes, when Hester closed the window behind her with sudden energy. "It has turned very cold," she said, coming out and taking a seat close by her sisters.

CHAPTER V.

HARPING BEFORE SAUL.

"Life is as tedious as a twice told tale."—KING JOHN.

THE autumn was a very fine one, and although the tension of Hester's mind scarcely relaxed, she soon fell back into her old habit of spending much of her time out of doors.

She loved each sunny nook among the rocks, and sat there thinking of the smuggling stories with which the coast abounded.

She was never now seen flying across the lawn while a shout from Joan or Mary followed her begging her to "remember that tea-time came before bed-time."

"I am glad to see that Hester is growing more sedate," Miss Carnsew said one day.

"I don't know," Joan answered. "I do not think it is her nature to be sedate."

A dense gloom brooded over the household at Caervean, growing thicker with every week, till it not only seemed to hide the family from the outer world, but to become a thick darkness which might be felt, dividing the separate members from each other.

They had never visited much among their neighbours, and now, without any discussion on the subject, it was tacitly agreed that that little should be dropped, at least for the time. The brothers were both away, and it did not cost the girls much to stay at home. There was an undercurrent of feeling, unacknowledged by any but Hester, that as the Carnsews had scarcely any equals in the district—for they would not count as such the parvenues who only dated back two or three generations, however wealthy they might be—they did not lose much by keeping themselves to themselves.

Mr. Edwin Carnsew himself was the last to yield to the influence of the cloud that so surely enveloped his house; but it was impossible for a blind man, though he might not see, not to feel the chill that repressed all growth of cheerfulness.

The presence of Samuel Truscott seemed to haunt the place like the shadow of some evil thing: the mere mention of his name would throw Hester into a mood of angry bitterness, and the sight of him pro-

duced such uncontrollable irritation that it required the strongest effort on her part to prevent its showing itself to every one. Yet for a long time she never once let go the reins of her passion, and she endured with apparent light-heartedness many hours of torture, for she became her uncle's constant companion, and never quitted him, if she could help it, while his nephew was on the premises.

"I wonder what Herodias's daughter felt like when she danced before Herod," she thought one day. "Did she feel buoyed up with the knowledge of the power of giving pleasure after others were worn threadbare, as I do sometimes to Uncle Samuel; or did she feel that disgust for herself and the spectators that I do at other times, and that the present even of an enemy's head in a charger was after all but small wages for the work?"

So anxious did Hester get about her cousin's constant visits to her uncle, that she would often hurry home when she had started for a walk—driven back to the house by a nervous dread that Mr. Truscott might have arrived during her absence. Her aunt encouraged her to spend a good part of every day in her uncle's part of the house, and he became very fond of her, as she did of him.

He cared to see none of the rest of the family; but Hester was always welcome, although he would sometimes, even when she was present, sit without

speaking for an hour. He never said an angry word to her, nor did she to him. However often he might grieve her in act or speech, it did not irritate her, and did but move her to pity, from a feeling that then his words and actions were not a part of himself, and that he was more of a victim in being capable of them than those who had to endure them were. Yet she had a keen sympathy with her aunt and sisters whenever Mr. Carnsew's senseless babble bubbled over the cauldron and hissed.

"Don't take any notice of what your uncle says to me, my dears," Miss Carnsew pleaded one day, after a scene in which both Joan and Mary had figured. "It is exasperating to be so spoken to, but your interference can do no good—indeed it does harm even to me, and makes matters worse. If he is let alone, your uncle forgets the nasty things he said to me a few minutes before; but he does not forget the feeling that prompted him to say them for a long while if you contradict him. So it really does make it more unpleasant."

"But, Aunt, Job himself could never have borne with Uncle patiently; and I really believe something would happen to me, I should have a fit, if I did not speak when he utters such silly nonsense. He knows he is talking nonsense and stories, and turning things inside out and upside down; and if he does not, he ought to be told," said Mary.

"It only does harm," again urged Miss Carnsew, "and makes him say worse things than he would else, I believe; so I hope you will try to restrain yourselves for my sake."

"I will try, Aunt," said Joan, "but it really scarcely seems right to let every remark he chooses to make pass as though you agreed with it."

Hester tried very often to revive the old pride of birth in her uncle, but found to her dismay that it had quite died out. One day she said—

"I suppose Phil is called after Charles I.'s Sir Philip, Uncle, not after the one in Edward IV.'s time?"

"I don't know, I am sure, my dear. I don't suppose it will make much difference to him who his fathers were."

"Were there any more than those two Sir Philips, Uncle?"

"I've forgotten, my dear. I think there was one more. I used to know them all well enough when I was a young man. I came across the family tree the other day and tore it up, else you might have seen for yourself; but it is no good filling up the house with such things as that."

"Oh, Uncle!" exclaimed Hester, feeling giddy for a moment with the combined shock of discovering the extent of her uncle's callousness and hearing of the loss. "What did you do with the scraps?"

"The scraps? The scraps of what—the paper?'

"Yes, Uncle."

"I am sure I can't tell. I tossed them into the grate, I think, my dear."

Here, fortunately for Hester, she caught her aunt's eye, and was informed by Miss Carnsew's gestures that she had secured the remains of the precious document.

"What made you do that, Uncle?" asked Hester, as calmly as she could.

"When anybody has so much to think about as I have he does not want trash like that lying about in the way."

"It is a great pity, Samuel, that you have not more to think about and to do," said his sister. "You would be a great deal happier and better if you had. It is sitting in here moped up all day that makes you take such queer fancies into your head."

"God bless my soul! Is a man to be driven out of his own house?" cried Mr. Carnsew, bringing his fist down upon his knee like a sledge-hammer upon an anvil.

"What folly you talk, Samuel. Who is wanting to drive you out of your house? You are always complaining and saying you cannot live a week, and that you are very ill, and yet you will not try to be made better."

"You would have me waste the little money I

have upon doctors," said Mr. Carnsew. "Why, it was not much more than a month ago that Samuel Truscott took me to see Dr. Sprance."

"It might as well have been twenty years ago from all the good that has come of it. You took the prescription and had it made up at once, but I believe you have every drop of the medicine stored away still in your drawer. And you will not follow his advice even as regards diet and exercise. I allow that it is wasting money to consult a doctor if you do not do anything that he tells you. Seeing and talking to him would not be likely to cure any one."

"Well, you needn't talk like that. I have some other medicine to finish up before I begin upon the new."

"What do you mean?" asked Miss Carnsew, in surprise, wondering if "a wise woman" had got hold of her brother somehow.

"Why, to be sure, one day I found I had a couple of bottles up there of old Dr. Searle's kind, and I thought I might as well take it as waste it, and perhaps it might be best not to mix the two kinds; and sometimes I forget it for a day or two, or perhaps more than that, so it is lasting very well."

His sister looked at him helplessly for a moment before she could collect her thoughts for a reply.

"Dr. Searle's prescription! Why, he has been

dead these eight years! You do not mean seriously to say that after you have been to a physician you come home and swallow somebody else's medicine that you have had stored away for eight or ten years! If it has possibly kept good all this time, it is not very likely to be what you want now. You will kill yourself some day if you do such things, I am afraid."

"I am not going to waste it," protested Mr. Carnsew. "And I don't know why you should speak against the poor man now he is dead. Dr. Searle was a very good man, and could ride after the hounds as well as any man I ever saw in my life; and I am not going to throw it away, you may be sure of that. It cost several shillings a bottle. I don't know what piece of extravagance you would be preaching next."

"But I am afraid you will do yourself some harm by it, Samuel. Are the two prescriptions alike?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. All I know is the physic is there, and it has to be taken before I begin on the new."

Down came the clenched fist again with a force that made it rebound.

"What a fool I have been to put myself in this position. Nobody ever had such cause to be vexed with himself as I have since the world began."

"It is a great pity you should vex yourself about

anything," said his sister. "You have nothing to worry over, and a good deal to be thankful for."

"Much to be thankful for, certainly!" exclaimed the gentleman. "Poverty, and the knowledge that I have ruined Samuel Truscott."

"Poverty!" said Miss Carnsew. "What do you mean by that? You have a great deal more money than you will or would wish to spend during the rest of your life. And as for Samuel, you know it must be foolish to talk of ruining him. Have you ever had a sixpence from him in any shape or form? If he is poor it certainly is not your doing, and do you not mean to leave him the farm he is living on?"

"And that is worse than nothing," grumbled the unhappy old man. "He says it will not pay its working expenses, much less give anybody a living."

"If that is the way he looks at it, then I would not trouble him with it. I would give it to somebody else."

"God bless my soul! Isn't he to have anything? What a fool I have been to have Edwin here to spend my money before my eyes! I wish I had only got a son of my own. I shouldn't have this trouble then."

"How would Samuel get on then?" asked Miss Carnsew. "I suppose he would manage to get a living then without the addition of the nice farm he will have now."

"How you talk! Why the place is only a sieve to shake his money through. He says so himself; and he is obliged to take the rent from his own farm to pay me mine."

"Then I should advise his letting this one too. He would make a little something by it then."

"And have the place get out of condition, and have to spend more upon it to get it up again than it is worth at the end of the term!" argued Mr. Carnsew. "You'd see poor Mary's boy dragged to gaol at the cart's-tail without caring that"—and he struck his right fist into the palm of his left hand.

"Poor Mary" during her lifetime had certainly not been much beloved by her brother, but now she was dead a sentimental delusion that she had been dear to him was nourished.

Miss Carnsew, though she disapproved of her sister's marriage, was, from a high sense of duty, her nephew's godmother, and had always fulfilled her duty by tipping him liberally when he came to see his uncle during his schoolboy days.

"We will hope that he will not do anything to bring himself to such a dismal pass as that," she said, trying to keep her temper. "I should grieve over it as much as any one."

"Who ever said he would?" exclaimed her brother. "God bless my soul! What do you say

the poor boy's done that you'd send him to gaol for? An industrious, hardworking young man, with no tom-foolery about him. What do you want to send him to gaol for?

"Samuel, Samuel," protested Miss Carnsew, "it was you that brought that up, not I."

"I don't know what it is, so it couldn't have been me. I never heard a word of it till this moment."

"Never heard a word of what?" said Miss Carnsew, hopelessly. "You have not heard anything from me."

"Not heard anything from you! Didn't you say a minute ago that he deserved to be sent to gaol?"

"No, no, Samuel, I never said anything of the kind. He hasn't done anything beyond the law that I ever heard of."

"Then why did you say so?"

"I did not say so."

"Why, God bless my soul! I heard you myself."

"Samuel, you made a mistake."

"Pshaw! 'tis you I think who make the mistake when you talk against your own poor sister's son, and she dead and buried all these years."

Hester found matter for both alarm and comfort in the conversation to which she had listened. It was clear enough that her uncle had lost all affection for her father, and grudged him Caervean after his own life; also that it was not only useless to attempt

to reason with him, but that it was adding fuel to fire to do so.

On the other hand it was evident, too, that by some sense of justice his conscience presented to him the unfairness of which he would be guilty, if, after allowing his nephew to live there so many years as the undisputed heir to the estate, he were to give it to any one else. It proved also that nothing was yet altered; and "while there is life there is hope," thought Hester.



CHAPTER VI.

A DECLARATION OF WAR.

THUS the winter passed, leaving Hester the continual witness of her uncle's weakness and obstinacy. As Samuel's influence increased, all happiness seemed to die in Mr. Carnsew. As far as Hester could see, she herself gave him no pleasure; she was merely the one person who produced no pain in him.

One day—the year had got into May now, and Hester's face had lost its childish look, which was replaced by a quick, searching expression that did not belong there—she was seated with her uncle, when she heard Samuel's hurried jumpy footstep in the hall, and the next minute he entered. She was knitting a pair of stockings for herself in preparation for the next winter. There had been a little joke or two between Joan and Mary about Hester's wisdom

in beginning in good time, but they were out of date, for Hester's vigils had already brought out a latent taste for feminine handiwork which had before lain so dormant that no one, not even herself, had believed in its existence at all.

To the girl her cousin appeared but little altered since he had begun to affect her life; his hair might be a shade greyer, his coat a shade cheaper and browner, his carriage a shade more insignificant. "But in what does insignificance consist?" thought Hester, tripping herself up in her summary. "A leech is smaller than an eel, certainly; but if one waded through a pond where they both flourished, I suspect one's thoughts would hang most to the leech's tail."

The usual conversation began about the weather, which was always peculiarly unsuited to a certain district seven miles distant; of land that grew wheat only to rust it, that fed sheep only to give them the foot-rot, that grew wood in extraordinary places where it must be removed, and which yet would not pay for the expense of cutting; of land where the most practical system of draining failed to reach the over-abundant springs, which consequently turned fertile fields into a swamp. To make a diversion, Hester rose from her seat and went to sit on the sofa by Mr. Carnsew. As she crossed the room she said in a joking voice—

"I might fancy I was at Cowper's tithing dinner, where he says,

> 'One talks of mildew and of frost,
> And one of storms of hail.'

I will not give you the other two lines."

"Well, Hester, I don't know how you may look at it, but I don't consider it is any matter for joking. It is a good deal too serious for that, in my opinion."

"What is it you're saying, my dear? I didn't hear," said her uncle, drawing the ends of her hair through his fingers—a favourite habit of his if she sat close to him.

"Isn't it getting quite long!" said Hester, not caring to repeat her first remark. "I shall soon be obliged to fasten it up."

"Eh? What?" said Mr. Carnsew. "Your hair? It does very well as it is, I think."

"Hester herself is getting pretty long," said Mr. Truscott. "In another twelve months she will be quite a curiosity. Never mind, Hester, there is money to be made out of all sorts of exhibitions, and not much work with it either. It pays better than farming, I'll be bound."

"What?" again asked Mr. Carnsew, staring at his nephew as if he was vainly trying in a bewildered way to follow his meaning.

"Laying aside all joking, Uncle," said Mr. Truscott, "I have heard that fortunes have been made that way."

Indignation had for a moment stopped Hester's power of utterance. The patience with which she had for months endured the irritation of his presence and speech forsook her. It was degrading that this creeping thing should dare to be so familiar as to pass remarks upon her person; but that he should make such a jest at her expense was the last straw that could not be endured, and she burst forth passionately—

"You must have been changed when you were a baby! Nothing with a single drop of Carnsew blood in its veins could be so utterly lost to all sense of decency and honour, as to foul its own nest by insulting a lady belonging to the family. Yes, your nurse must have changed you!"

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Samuel.

He looked as foolish as it was possible to look. That would be a pretty notion to get into his uncle's head. Changed by his nurse indeed! His respect for Hester rose with his anger. When your enemies show that they can be dangerous, your scorn for them disappears.

But Mr. Carnsew scarcely took in what Hester had said. "Bless my soul!" he ejaculated, in a bewildered tone; "if the child hasn't put herself into a downright passion. What's the matter, my dear?"

It was the first time in her life that her uncle had

seen her completely lose her temper, and he was surprised, but perfectly unable to understand the cause of the outbreak.

Hester was vexed with herself. She had let loose her bag of winds and yet nobody was shipwrecked. Of course there must be open hostility between her cousin and herself now. She went back to a window seat.

The gentlemen sat in utter silence for some minutes.

A long bed of lilies of the valley ran along under the windows, and the flowers were scenting the room. Hester, stooping down, put out her hands between the iron bars that protected the casement, and gathering a white blossom or two fastened them into her dress. As she turned, she heard her uncle break the silence by remarking—

"It is time for you to be thinking of marrying, Samuel. As far as I can see it is a mistake to put it off too long."

Mr. Truscott laughed very uneasily. He felt that Hester would not lose a word of the conversation, and after the blow she had just dealt him he did not wish to be pushed within reach of another. "Well, it does not do to be in too much of a hurry, you know, Uncle Samuel. What is it they say—'Marry in haste, repent at leisure,' isn't it?"

"The lady is still waiting for you, you see," said

Mr. Carnsew, passing over his nephew's little saying.

Samuel shuffled about a minute, and then said—

"Perhaps she might not care to have me."

"Pooh! You have never asked her. All women think it's a fine thing to get married, and jump at the chance."

Hester never wore the stocking she was knitting, but she finished it and kept it for many years; and every now and again she would look at it and take notice of what she called her ring of agony, which was some half a dozen rounds of knitting which she got through before tea was announced, and which were distinctly marked by the tightness of the work.

"My dear, Joan promised to come up to tea with us to-night," said Miss Carnsew, as she came into the room. "Will you go and fetch her?"

Upon Joan's entrance Mr. Truscott abandoned his uncle, and turned his polite attentions to her. He waited until she took her place at the table, and then slided into a seat beside her. He ate his meal, turned awkwardly towards her, and made extraordinary efforts to engage her in his sprightly conversation. These efforts were received by Joan with perfect politeness, but they added a little extra stiffness to her manner.

The sight of Mr. Truscott's movement to seat

himself beside her sister produced an actual feeling of nausea in Hester, and, begging her aunt to excuse her for a minute, she went out on the lawn and gasped in the fresh salt air as if for life; but finding her anxiety to see and hear what was going on unbearable, she soon returned to the stifling presence in the dining-room.

As she entered she heard her uncle's voice addressing his sister—

"Did I hear you saying this morning that you wanted some more flour?"

"Yes, Samuel," replied Miss Carnsew, apparently hesitating to discuss the subject before guests.

"Well!" protested the master of the house in indignant amazement; "it cannot be more than a fortnight ago that you had the last lot. I shall never be able to pay my way if this kind of thing goes on. Where does it all go to, I should like to know! There never used to be anything like this."

"Don't be so foolish, Samuel! We have not had any flour for three weeks: and if we had, what would it matter? We do not use more now than we have always used; and as you have by far the best appetite of any one in the house, I do not see how the quantity we require is to be lessened unless you care to go hungry yourself. I do not wish to, nor should I wish the servants to do so. There is no waste in

this house, you may be quite sure. I should think it sinful."

"Good God! A regiment might be kept for what it costs me here!" exclaimed Mr. Carnsew. "Didn't I pay £5 to the butcher yesterday? And to-day you want flour! It is all very fine to have, have, but where is the money to come from to pay for it all, I should like to know?"

"Five pounds for a two months' butcher's bill is not extravagant, I think," protested his sister; "and if you cannot afford to pay for necessaries, I don't know how most people are to live at all."

"And a hard struggle it is, and no mistake, Aunt Emily," pushed in Mr. Truscott.

"Struggle! I don't see any struggle," said Mr. Carnsew. "A man is knocked right down. I shall be sold out before I know where I am, and come to be buried by the parish. Hester, my dear," passing her a plate, "don't you want a piece of cake?"

Hester had but a small appetite for cake or anything else that evening. Every time her cousin dragged up an unwilling smile to be bestowed upon Joan she could scarcely keep herself quiet. When he left, she wandered away through the long passages to her old seat in the window of her sister's sitting-room, and watched him ride down to the farther gates. She saw him glance to the right and left.

"I suppose he means to be monarch of all he surveys," she thought; "and more than that, he is to take possession of us, body and soul, through Joan."

She forgot that once before she had decided that Joan must be sacrificed if necessary. "How dare he think of such a thing! Poor old Uncle Samuel was quite out of his mind; so he might be excused for making a fool of himself. But it really seemed to be Phil's duty to bestow a kicking upon Mr. Truscott for presuming to lift his eyes to one of his sisters. And so 'from the centre all round to the sea,' he's to be 'lord of the fowl and the brute!' Wait a little, please, sir. There must be some way of preventing it, and you have not walked over my dead body yet."

Her eyes were wandering aimlessly up and down the advertisement column of a newspaper that had been lying on the window-seat when she came in, and which she had taken in her hand when she sat down. Unconsciously she read one advertisement over and over again, and now suddenly its meaning flashed into her brain. It was headed "Free passages to New Zealand," and offered them to various kinds of domestic servants. What came into her mind at the moment Hester did not know, only a fresh sensation agitated her strongly. She could not realize it, or catch it; only an electric shock ran

through her, giving her new life, was it?—or death? She stayed there till the air grew dark and chill around her, scarcely thinking—only feeling.

"It would save Joan, and poor Uncle, and Papa and the boys, but I could not look upon it afterwards," she said, as she rose and felt her way downstairs.



CHAPTER VII.

ON GUARD.

"I crave direction, Father, how to know
The sign of that imperative whose right
To sway my act, in face of thronging doubts,
Were an oracular gem in price beyond
Urim and Thummim lost to Israel."

COLLEGE BREAKFAST PARTY.



ESTER spent the next morning in collecting the back numbers of *The Spectator*, and, carrying them to her own room, carefully read everything she could see upon Euthanasia, and after dinner she went off to the beach.

At first she crossed the whole length of the broad golden sand, and then, climbing to the top of the cliff, she followed its edge for a mile and descended half-way again.

No shining sand contrasted brightly beneath with the dark rocks; it was a headland she had reached, and deep blue waves were lazily breaking against the cliffs. Half-way down Hester knew of a little platform, and a boulder that had often served her as a seat. In stormy weather she could hardly have reached it, but to-day there was no difficulty. The constant flow of mighty waters, the rustling of the light sea-breeze around her, and the genial warmth of her retreat, would often have produced a drowsiness in her—a sinking of all the senses of mind and body into one delicious conscious pleasure of existence. But Hester was to-day in a mood which defied all luring into forgetfulness, and had come here that she might be alone to think—shut into herself by the power of sound and solitude.

"I must be very careful," she reflected, "for there are many things to be thought of. It is only 'if necessary' that I shall act upon my plans, for I do not think I could do it without the extra motive, however much it might be for his good, poor old man. That is weak and cowardly of me: the interest I have in his death ought to be secondary, and the blessing it would be to him to be freed from all his pains, and miseries, and meannesses, ought to be the primary object. But I will try to be honest to myself at least, and I know that it is not so. Does not the Bible itself exalt Jael, the wife of Heber,

to the skies because, forsooth, she killed an enemy of the Israelites and lost nothing herself by doing it? I, for the sake of my own people, shall kill a friend of my own, and lay the whole length of the rest of my years upon the sacrifice. I am sixteen now, and I dare say I shall live to be sixty-five—I am very strong, and we are not a short-lived race—so there will be forty-nine years to be borne as I best may in sickness and in health—alone wherever I may go, solitary in the gayest company, cut off from sympathies and hopes, if I do this thing. I should have to be absent when it happened, or I should betray myself, and the law does not yet recognize this new gospel—and it would never do for a Carnsew to be charged with murder! I could not look upon the place day by day and live at my ease, and have nothing to do but gratify my whims and to teach poverty-stricken labourers' wives their way to hucka-back here and heaven hereafter. It would seem then as if I had done it to benefit myself, and I believe it would turn my brain. No, I must be away—gone—when it happens, and I must never return. Shall I never regret what I have done? Will there not be a time when what has been gained will seem nothing compared to what has been lost? Very likely, for the present weight is always the one that seems heaviest to be borne. Still I do not think that feeling will last long. I shall soon again feel that what

I can suffer alone is not to be compared to what we should *all* have suffered.

"Then I must earn a living somehow, and put aside something for my old age, for though a Carnsew may work without disgrace, I could never become a pauper. And I shall have to start at the very bottom of the ladder, for I shall have no character. I am strong enough to work hard. I wonder if I shall look like a servant."

She spent a couple of hours thinking over "what might be," and then she rose and scrambled up her little path. "I am not saying farewell. It is not the last time," she said, lovingly, as she watched a pair of sea-gulls poised above their nest on an island rock in the distance. "There are no white-caps on the water to flash like the wings of sea-birds to-day."

Still she did not go home. She made her way through sandhill and rabbit-warren, bright meadows and springing cornfields, towards the churchyard. The churchyard itself was a bleak resting-place, bare of the shelter of tree or shrub. No flowers could be cultured to luxuriance by loving hands, and the fashion of *immortelles* had not reached so far into the country.

Most of the Carnsews lay under the church, where their glories were stoutly vouched for in monumental marble. When the vault was no longer available,

a corner of the churchyard, cut off by a path from the rest, had been left for the family, and it was to a simple mound of turf that Hester made her way across the dewy grass.

There had been a time when she had remembered nothing of her mother, but lately one or two memories had returned. One day she had seen Joan with a cottager's baby in her lap, telling stories, or rather nursery rhymes, to it. Hester had realized suddenly that Joan was like her mother in expression of face, and there sprang before her a scene where her mother, with Edwin on her lap, sang the very same rhymes, as much to amuse Phil and herself, who stood at her elbow, as for a lullaby to the infant. Hester tried this evening, as she stood in the still warmth of the declining sun, to fix the floating chaos in her brain into abiding shapes, but she could not.

"Ah mother, mother!" she cried, in the bitterness of her spirit, "I wonder that you *could* die and leave us so helpless. I never missed you when I was a child; it was not then that I wanted you, but these years since I have been a woman. I have missed something you would have given me — your heart speaking to my heart, your life's wisdom to teach my ignorance. And all this perplexity would never have happened had you been with us; the cause of the trouble would have been absent. You would have stopped the gap between Uncle Samuel and Papa

when it was a tiny one, instead of letting the breach get so wide that any fool who chooses can drive through it and take a short cut to Caervean."

With the sense that some one was near, although she neither saw nor heard any one, she turned round and saw the vicar approaching her, walking also on the grass.

"Good evening, Hester," he said.

Hester's heart gave an angry bound.

"What right has he to intrude upon me?" she thought. "And why will he speak genuflistically; luscious and slow, that none of the flavour may be lost? But perhaps he has come, after all, to say something to me that I shall do wisely to listen to!" She wanted him to attack her position, but she could give no challenge.

She held out her hand, at the same time moving towards the path. He turned with her, and they went silently to the stone stile. Hester could not think of anything to say that would not jar upon her own feelings unless it were something uncivil; and, moreover, she wanted to be the listener, not the talker. Whether her companion did not speak because he wished her to feel that there was sufficient sympathy between them to be silent when they were alone together, Hester could not tell.

When they had crossed the stile into the high road she stood a moment, and said, "I must not take you out of your way."

"My way will be your way this evening, Hester."

"Oh no, thank you," said Hester, hastily. "I am not the least nervous; I should not be here if I were, and there is certainly nothing for me to be afraid of."

"No, indeed! Nothing would wish to hurt *you*," he replied, with a delicate accent on the "you"—slight, but still distinguishable.

"A new version of Una and the Lion," thought the girl. "Who would have thought that the oil of that tongue could have smeared that old story that was so pleasant to me in my childhood! Of course he believes that if I accidentally stepped on an adder's tail (I shouldn't have courage to do it on purpose) the thing would wriggle away grateful for the attention; but I know all the same *I* should expect to feel a sharp bite at my ankle before I knew what I was doing."

"Still," added the vicar, "I cannot deprive myself of the pleasure of your company—one that I do not get as often as I could wish."

"Why not, then? I am generally about, and I have never cut you or run away yet," said Hester.

"Ah, so many things interfere with our pleasures."

"I wish I was a man," she thought, desperately. "Then I would swear at him, and see what he would do."

Not being a man, she resisted this impulse, but formed the resolution that she would not say another word till he spoke to her. "I don't care if it is all the way home. I don't want his company, and if he wants mine (which he does not) he may make the best he can of it." So they passed among the straggling cottages without saying a word, and Hester wondered if she was looking foolish, for she knew that of course the women would come to their doors to stare at them. But presently there was another stile to be crossed, and they got into fields. He took her hand and placed it on his arm. Hester submitted. She felt curious. She was just as tall as he was, and could probably have walked or run him down any day. Still, he should help her if he chose to think he could do it. Was he going to try and help her spiritually? Was there anything, after all, that she could learn from him that was worth the learning?

At length he spoke. "Your mother would be so happy to see her daughters now."

"At this particular moment?" Hester was tempted to ask; but she had not the courage to use such a sacred topic for impertinence.

"So happy to see what they are—to what they have grown."

"You mean my height?" said Hester, giving way. "I am afraid it is a little out of the common."

Mr. Vigars for a moment was tongue-tied, but he showed no annoyance, and did not even change the subject.

Hester was speedily repentant, and kept her tongue well under control for the rest of the walk. If he really had anything to say to her she wished to hear it. She became very meek, and even attempted to encourage the vicar's conversation in the direction she hoped it would take, but to no purpose. He seemed determined upon putting her on good terms with herself. "Why should any one be pleased with us?" she had asked. "We are no better than our neighbours; possibly we are no worse, but a negative virtue is not much to set up on, is it?"

And he had laughed a gentle deprecatory "Ah, ah!" and remarked "what a pleasant thing it was that there were still a few people left in the world who failed to see their own virtues."

They did not enter the great gates, but took a nearer footpath which brought them to one of the plantations at the side of the house.

Mr. Vigars would not go indoors. He wished Hester to feel that he had come with her solely for the pleasure of being with her; so at the little gate he turned, and Hester went on alone through the trees.

"What a broken-down world it is," she thought. "People may talk of spiritual pastors and masters,

but here is this man, who, if his system is true, ought to have given me rebuke and correction, but who tenders me instead maudlin sentimentality. People say divine truths are not affected by the conduct of those who preach them. I beg leave to differ in opinion. The richest wine that was ever pressed would have no charm for me if it were presented in a dirty cup. What starving wretches have I fed? what shivering have I clothed? Wherein have I denied myself? It is all very well to talk, or rather it is all very bad to talk, but I have nothing to be proud of but my good looks and my family; and I had nothing to do with getting either of them personally, so there is not much sense in being proud of them."

For some weeks life went on much as usual at Caervean, and Hester could scarcely believe that it would ever be incumbent to act upon her plans. Her father's crops really appeared to promise an abundant harvest, and he was in the highest spirits, feasting his thoughts upon them as if they alone had been enough to relieve him from all anxieties. Sometimes Hester envied him his spirits, and sometimes his perpetual demand for sympathetic response would irritate her. She had heard so many years of marvellous productions which had in the end barren results, that all hope through her father was gone.

One bright afternoon, however, the three sisters sat

under the trees; Joan and Hester sewing, Mary reading aloud. The narrative of the biography her sister was reading drew Hester's thoughts to itself without exciting her, and calmed the nerves that had become so highly strung.

It was so comfortable in the cool shade; the world around was so pleasant to look upon, bathed in the sunshine with its intense lights and shadows, so bright to look out upon; though, at the same time, by suggesting oppressive heat to weary toilers, it made their retreat the more precious. It was impossible not to feel that it would be always so: the shade would be for her sisters and herself on hot days, and the warm sunshine on chilly ones.

After a while Mary closed her book, and Hester pushed her work aside, and, dropping it on the grass, stood up gazing before her.

"Well, Hester, what is it?" asked Joan.

"I feel poetical," said Hester, solemnly; "but all I can think of is in the words of the old lady we have heard of—

> 'Oh Mediterranean Sea of blue,
> Oh Mediterranean Sea!
> Oh Mediterranean blue, blue sea,
> Oh Mediterranean Sea!'

And that is about as fine as the 'Oh! oh!' of the Marquis in 'Les Précieuses Ridicules,' isn't it?"

They all laughed.

"We would prefer something original," said Joan.

"We are prepared to give it as favourable a hearing as those unlucky girls were the poetry of their Marquis."

"I dare say. I should like something original myself. I feel it is in my heart—or brain; I believe most in the brain—but it refuses to come out of it in any tangible fashion. A funny thing it would be if my head should explode like a bombshell with it, as my tongue refuses its assistance!"

"I suppose your feeling is incoherent. I don't think your tongue has much to do with your muteness," said Mary.

"In order to prevent any such startling calamity, suppose we change the conversation," suggested Joan. "I think we might plan our grotto now. We have such a quantity of materials; quite enough, I think—though, of course, when one begins to work in shells and pebbles a lot will soon be used up. Hester, you will not be wanting to do the heavy masonry, I hope."

"No," said Hester; "I should not like it to come tumbling in and crushing anybody who might be there."

"Yes, I think arranging designs for the floor and walls will be enough for us to attempt ourselves. Here is Edwin;" and she called to her younger brother, who at that moment came riding round an angle of the house.

"What do you want?" he asked, drawing up his horse on the path near them.

"Can you suggest a plan for bringing water into the grotto we think of making?"

"How realistic women are," he said. "You can't be content without having water dripping from your roof like the little caves down on the beach! Well, you had better have a tank made with a few holes in the bottom, and put in on the top of your natural curiosity. In the summer you can all three carry water to it from the pump—four or five times a week will do; and it will have a certain advantage over most out-of-door labour—in rainy weather it will look after itself."

"We mean to sit there during the summer," said Joan. "I think I have heard that one of the horrors of the Inquisition was water coming drop by drop on the victim's head: we don't want to torture ourselves for nothing, nor to spoil our clothes, so our idea of water has been a fountain and a little well."

"Oh, I can't tell about that. It would not be very difficult to manage, I fancy; it is near the house, and you could easily get some pipes laid down."

"Do you think Papa would object?"

"Does he ever mind anything?" said the boy, carelessly.

"I have not had a ride for weeks," said Hester, looking enviously at the horse.

"Well, come along, have a canter now. We will do it in the old fashion," said her brother, stretching out his arm invitingly.

"The knight and the lady share one steed?" said Hester, stepping towards the path.

"What are you thinking of doing?" exclaimed Joan.

But Hester took no heed. Edwin held out his hand; she gave a spring, and in a moment was before him. There was no time for further parley. The horse turned off the path, leaped the ha-ha, and galloped across the meadow beyond.

Joan and Mary sprang to their feet and looked anxiously after.

"Away went Gilpin, neck or nought!" said Mary, as Hester's garden-hat flew off and fell into the ditch.

"What a mad couple they are," groaned Joan, when, on seeing that Hester was keeping her seat, she recovered her speech.

Presently Edwin wheeled his horse round, and it came cantering back.

Joan ran to open the gate. "Don't take the ditch again," she shouted, imploringly; but she forbore to make any reproach when Hester jumped lightly to the ground, and Edwin rode away, calling out—

"I'll back you against Dick Turpin any day, Hester!"

"Now, Joan, don't look so frightened," panted Hester. "It is a great relief to feel perfectly careless about everything once now and then. I had better go in and get a stick to fish up my hat with, I suppose."

While Hester was engaged in this occupation Miss Carnsew appeared on the lawn. She was carrying out her own doctrine of the duty of diligent employment of time. In her hands she held her knitting, and her fingers were plying the needles busily, yet so mechanically that there was no symptom of pressure in her movements as she walked slowly towards her nieces, turning her eyes now this way, now that.

"Did I see Edwin ride round the garden just now?" she asked.

"Yes," said Joan.

"Where is he gone?"

"I think he is only having a ride. I did not hear him say where he was going."

"Daw is working in the higher garden, isn't he? I am going up there," said the aunt, in a tone of invitation, to which Joan responded by moving away with her; and they quietly paced the walks, discussing Daw's work, comparing the gooseberries this year with those of last, remarking that there had been more rain last summer than this.

"How funny it is," said Hester, as she watched the light flutter of her aunt's lace, "that Aunt Emily

will come out into the garden for half an hour with nothing on her head but her cap; and yet if you proposed that she should pass the same time in the same attire walking or driving on a road, she would think that you wished her to catch a cold, and that she would certainly do it if she were so venturesome."

"So she would," said Mary. "It is chiefly how you feel about things that they really affect you, I believe."

Presently the three girls were again seated sewing, while Miss Carnsew moved from one flower-bed to another, critically examining the contents of each. "Here comes Edwin again," she said, at length, looking towards the gates.

Hester's eyes were keen as a hawk's. "No, Aunt, it is Samuel."

No one spoke a word. Miss Carnsew stood still, close to her nieces. It seemed to Hester as if they were waiting mutely for their doom.

Mr. Truscott turned his horse off the drive on to the turf, so that his approach was also silent, till the inner gate was reached, at which he dismounted, and perceiving the group underneath the trees, he threw his bridle over one of the posts and walked towards his aunt and cousins.

"Good afternoon, Aunt Emily. What are you doing, Joan—stitching away?"

Hester was not covetous of her cousin's good opinion; but she would rather have heard his tone of approval bestowed upon herself. As it was she could not stay and endure Joan's placidness, so she got up and walked away, saying—

"I will see for Daw to take your horse."

"If only it were possible to dismiss the master to the stable instead of his horse, how cheerfully would I put up with its company indoors for the rest of the day, though I don't even like the animal. When men become greedy swine, what a pity it is that there is no Circe to be met with to fashion the body to fit the spirit," she reflected, as, after finding Daw, she entered the house through a side-door, that she might be ready at her uncle's side.



CHAPTER VIII.

CROSSING THE RUBICON.

BRUTUS: "It must be by his death; and for my part
I know no personal cause to spurn at him
But for the general."



ESTER remembered for years every trifling incident of the evening, with a feeling of wonder that anything trifling could have happened on that day.

Her sisters did not come in with her aunt and Samuel.

She remembered her cousin's first remark to his uncle, begun at the door and jerked out as he crossed the room and presented, rather than held out, his hand.

"Oh, Uncle Samuel, this *is* hot weather, if you like to call it so! You don't feel it so much here by

the sea, but we are scorched up completely, and no mistake. What the sheep are to do if we don't have rain shortly, I don't know. There is not a blade of grass to be seen on the whole farm. And how have you been lately, Uncle? Better, I hope?"

"There's not much of that for me, I am afraid," answered Mr. Carnsew. "However, I have just come to the end of Dr. Searle's medicine—at least there's only a dose or two more, I think; and when I get to the other I am hoping it may make a change."

"It is to be hoped so, I am sure, Uncle Samuel."

During tea Hester saw her father cross the high ground of the meadow, his figure showing dark against the sky. She noticed that his stick dragged, and although he kept up his usual quick pace he walked like a man who was tired. He came through the garden, and instead of going at once to the door he stopped at the open window, and, looking in, said cheerfully—

"Ah! good evening, Samuel;" then added to his uncle, "What beautiful weather it is. I shall have my hay down to-morrow. There is a splendid shred of grass in the Higher Close, as thick as a mat."

"I can tell you *we* have nothing of that kind," said Samuel, and Miss Carnsew instantly created a diversion by saying to her nephew at the window—

"Will you come in and have a cup of tea with us? You are looking tired."

"That sounds as if he could not have one at home," said Hester, laughing.

"Thank you, I will come in," said her father. "We shall have a glorious sunset to-night."

She remembered, too, how when her father was seated opposite her, her uncle, who looked upon her still as a child to whom sweet things must be attractive, struggled to reach a plate of cake, and in stretching it out to her upset his cup of tea. Samuel said in a consolatory voice, "Ah, well, Uncle Samuel, the cleverest of us, you see, meet with little mishaps sometimes." And her father—was it possible?—had made a joke, and called the slop, which had run half-way down the table, "The Rio Colorado."

This little accident, which Mr. Carnsew could not but feel was a result of clumsiness, made him at first silent, but afterwards self-assertive. He proposed a game of cards.

"No one cares to play whist in the summer in broad daylight," said Miss Carnsew.

"Oh, you never like anybody to enjoy themselves. Hester, my dear, you go down and see for Joan, please."

Hester hesitated for a moment.

"Will you go and see for Joan?" repeated her uncle, in a tone which sent her at once.

When Joan entered the drawing-room Mary and Hester filed after her, very erect and martial-looking.

"Samuel, will you and Joan see if you can't beat her father and Mary?" said Mr. Carnsew.

"I am too busy to play this evening," said Mary. "I particularly want to finish some embroidery."

"Very well; then, Hester, you take her place, my dear."

Hester did not speak, but her father protested, "I do not care to sit down to cards in daylight. Samuel might come out and look at my hay instead."

"No one wishes to play," said Miss Carnsew.

"Perhaps it is as well to let it go to-night," added Samuel.

"Oh, very well! Just as you please," said Mr. Carnsew; "but I should have thought you would have liked to have something to amuse yourselves with."

"We can enjoy your company for a little while, Uncle Samuel, don't you see?"

Mr. Carnsew apparently did not see, for he seated himself in an easy-chair with a thump that broke one of the springs, and sat staring before him without making a remark for half an hour.

Mary and Hester soon ceased to feel warlike; the scene began to take a comical turn to them. Their father again proposed an adjournment to the Lower Close to see the hay; but Mr. Truscott, who had not taken his ride with the object of pleasing his cousin, refused to go.

This annoyed Mr. Edwin Carnsew, and he sought to console himself with a newspaper.

The click of Miss Carnsew's knitting-needles ceased, and she sat upright in her chair, giving frequent nods, and every two minutes waking up with a start. The first time she did so she said, "I hope you will excuse me, my dears. Your uncle took a fancy to go out and look at his horse last night soon after we had gone to bed. He thought he had heard it cough or sneeze the day before, and he had not seen it since. What with getting up to see what he was doing, and his going up and down stairs three or four times, and the noise of the doors, I got so excited that I never slept for the night."

She knitted a row or two, but soon her hands stopped, and she dozed again.

Mr. Truscott was nervous; he fidgeted in the silence. "Why, Hester," he exclaimed so briskly that his aunt started and dropped her knitting, "I did not expect to see you to-day. I thought the last time I was here I heard something about your going to stay with your cousins the Daymans?"

"Ah, did you?" said Hester. "I have not gone yet. I do not know when I shall; I have not fixed any time."

"You will go over and take them by surprise some day, just when you feel inclined to go, I expect," said Joan.

"Perhaps so; or I mayn't go at all. I wonder from which of my animal ancestors I have inherited my dislike to bind myself to any proposal of motion made by other people," said Hester.

"Perhaps from the crabs—we are to include fishes among our grandfathers, aren't we?—they always go sideways and backwards, and every way but straight onward," suggested Mary.

"Suppose you write and ask Mr. Darwin his opinion on the subject. He might be able to help you to a conclusion," said Joan.

"Who is that, Joan?" asked Samuel, very uncomfortable, vaguely fancying that, as he was conscious of not quite grasping what they were saying to each other, they might be having some underhand fun out of himself. "Isn't that the monkey man?"

"He is anything but that, I expect," said Mary, laughing.

"You mean the same man we are talking of, I dare say," said Joan—"Mr. Darwin, the author of 'The Origin of Species.'"

"But, Joan, it is all nonsense, isn't it, all this pretending we are nobody knows what? It can't be true, eh?"

"So you feel a consciousness that you yourself refute the theory?" asked Mary. "As far as I am concerned I feel nothing of the kind."

"You object to the idea that your great-grand-

father ate cocoanuts and climbed trees?" chimed in Hester.

"You bring it a little too near, Hester," said Joan, receiving Samuel into the Carnsew family in the desperation of the moment. "We can trace a good way farther back than that, you know."

"Well, I confess to a decided taste for nuts and fruit of all kinds; and if I was not afraid of breaking down the branches, I would try climbing one of our trees to-morrow," said Hester.

"But it can't be true, Joan?" appealed Mr. Truscott again.

"I do not know. I could not at all undertake to pass a decided opinion on the subject," said Joan. "I think it is very likely to be true, though I do not think the case is proved; but I have never studied it much. I do not wish to believe it, for I fancy if I did I should feel something like a cannibal whenever I ate meat, and should have to become a vegetarian—which I do not wish to."

"Surely if you were so much more nice than wise as that you might starve yourself. There would be nothing left for you to eat but milk, for there is much less of a missing link, it seems to me, between plants and animals than between monkeys and men," said Mary.

"I cannot agree with you. I feel sure that the difference between vegetable existence and animal

life is as wide as the difference between nothing and the smallest atom—which I suppose you will allow is greater than the difference between that atom and the most gigantic form?"

"But I don't see, Joan, why plants should not have a conscious existence," said Mary.

"This is what I call talking metaphysics of the highest order—what you don't understand yourself, as the man said," remarked Hester, in a tone of pretended admiration.

"Eh! what, Hester?" exclaimed Mr. Truscott, turning suddenly upon her.

The girls laughed, and Joan explained, "It is only a story Mr. Vigars told us once."

"A story, did you say, Joan? Ah." Then turning abruptly to his cousin, he exclaimed, "Talking of animals, how is your horse, Edwin?"

It was the other gentleman's turn to fidget now, and the paper gave an impatient rustle as he answered—

"Oh! he is doing very well."

"Badly cut, wasn't he?" persisted Mr. Truscott.

"Oh, I don't know—I have seen worse," said his cousin, in a very discouraging manner.

"What horse is that you are talking about?" asked Mr. Carnsew, loudly.

He still sat heavy, inert, expressionless, like a block of rough-hewn stone; but now his eyes flashed

out from beneath their shaggy overhanging brows like the grains of silver in a granite mass.

"Monarch," replied his nephew, with his eyes fixed upon the paper as if he was engrossed in an interesting subject and did not wish to be disturbed.

But his uncle was dead to such impressions. "Monarch! Isn't that the name you have given to the young colt you have just taken up?" he asked, so loudly that Miss Carnsew picked up her knitting and said—

"My dear Samuel, fortunately we are none of us deaf."

"Yes," replied the nephew.

"God bless my soul! you don't mean to say that you have thrown down that young horse too?"

"I don't know about throwing him down. He has gone down. I was holding him carefully enough. He couldn't have been quite what I fancied him. I think he was badly shod too. This new man is worse than nothing; I shall have to find somebody else to do my work."

To this Mr. Carnsew answered with a scornful and indignant "Pshaw!"

"Oh, it is not much: just a little hair rubbed off. It will soon be as right as ever."

"Don't talk that nonsense to me," said the old gentleman. "I know better, and so do you. A horse that has once been down can never be right again."

"No, no," said Mr. Truscott, shaking his head; "that's true enough. It has knocked fifty pounds out of your colt, your throwing him down."

"I have not taken sixpence out of him," said Edwin Carnsew, impatiently, putting down his paper and turning at bay.

His daughters were frightened at hearing him utter such a statement.

"Yes, fifty pounds," said the uncle. "There is nobody in the world but yourself fool enough to give the same price for a tumbledown, broken-kneed horse that they would if he was sound. That ever I should have lived to come to this!"

"But I don't mean to sell him—I never intended to; and he is worth as much to me as he was before."

"God bless my soul! you have thrown down horses enough to buy half the parish!" exclaimed the old gentleman.

"Half the parish! You may as well say half the kingdom at once. I don't suppose I have thrown down more horses than you have yourself."

"Uncle Samuel could afford it a little better," put in Mr. Truscott.

"Well, that certainly is nobody's affair but my own," sharply returned his cousin.

"Isn't it?" said Mr. Carnsew. "There is no mistake that a fool and his money are soon parted!

You ar'n't fit to be trusted on anything better than a five-shilling donkey! The lunatic asylum would be the cheapest place to keep you. My few thousands will be nowhere—nowhere!"

"What do you mean? The horse is mine. I bought and reared him with my own money. If it had been yours you might have had some excuse for complaining."

"Fifty pounds now, thousands the other day, and God knows what besides that I have never heard of," came from Mr. Carnsew, like a horrid groan from an ill-set machine.

"Thousands!" echoed his nephew. "I dare say a couple of thousands will more than cover all that."

"I heard you had put in ever so much. I dare say it was ten."

"Nonsense! I didn't invest the half of that in the beginning, and I got some of it back again."

"I don't know anything about that."

"But I do."

"A beautiful colt he was," lamented Mr. Truscott. "It is a dreadful pity anything should have happened to him."

"The cleverest of us meet with little mishaps sometimes, as you said at tea, Samuel," said Hester, with white lips.

But her cousin saw no applicability in the remark.

"This is no little mishap; fifty pounds is no joke to lose."

"Fortunately for you, you have not lost it," said his aunt.

"No, that is true enough. I have not thrown down a horse for the last twenty years, I believe."

"Perhaps it would have been better for you if you had," retorted his cousin.

"Come, come!" shouted the uncle. "Do you want everybody to be in the same boat as yourself?"

"No, I don't," said his nephew, all prudence cast to the winds; "I would rather give a good many people a wide berth."

"Samuel," said Miss Carnsew, hurriedly, although her brother was not speaking at the moment, "don't speak so loudly—the servants will hear."

"What do I care who hears. I say he is a cursed spendthrift, who is doing his best to ruin me."

"Hester, my dear, will you ring, please, and we will go to supper," said her aunt.

"I am going down to my own house," said Mr. Carnsew. "Come, Joan; good night, Aunt Emily."

Hester was the last of the family to leave the room. At the door she turned and looked at the group she was leaving behind: her cousin lurching with awkward ease against a table, her aunt sitting

trembling and dismayed, her uncle swinging his fist up and down "with measured beat and slow."

"You'll have some supper, child, before you go?" he said, looking at Hester.

But she went out and closed the door. "The Ides of March are come," she said.

CHAPTER IX.

ET TU, BRUTE!

"A weary lot is thine, fair maid,
A weary lot is thine!
To pull the thorn thy brow to braid,
And press the rue for wine!"
ROKEBY.

STRANGE it was that her cousin should soon afterwards ride away from the house as he would have done on ordinary occasions. Hester crept to the window of her room, and looked out as she heard the horse move off.

Mr. Truscott went slowly down the drive, looking around him, as he had got into a habit of doing lately; once he even wheeled his horse round, and took a glance at the house itself. It would not have surprised Hester at the moment if a thunderbolt had

descended upon that upturned face, or if a sudden rift in the earth had appeared beneath the horse's feet—but nothing happened.

The night and next day wore away, and no news arrived of a runaway horse or a midnight tragedy.

Miss Carnsew tried to induce her nieces to spend the evening with her, but Joan was firm.

"After what Uncle Samuel said to Papa, I do not think we ought to go to his house the next day just as if nothing had happened, Aunt."

"But, my dear," urged Miss Carnsew, ill at ease, "your uncle is not accountable for what he says when he gets upon such subjects; you ought to take no notice of it."

"I cannot go so soon, Aunt dear. We must wait a few days."

The next afternoon Miss Carnsew came to her nieces' sitting-room, perplexed and dismayed.

"I don't know what we are to do about it, my dear," she said to Joan. "Your uncle is going to alter his will, he says."

"We had better send him straight off to Bodmin. There is a place for mad people there, isn't there?" said Mary.

"He only talks of it, I expect," replied Joan, trembling. "He will not really do it."

"Yes, he will. When he works a thing out in

his mind, like he has this, I know he will do his best to carry it out. He has begun two or three letters to his lawyer, but cannot get through them. So now he has decided to wait till Samuel Truscott comes again, and put him to write his orders."

Though neither of the sisters was absolutely surprised at the announcement, they felt that they had been utterly unprepared for it.

Presently Joan asked, "And what will he do?"

"Samuel is to have the house and land and most of the money. Hester is to have £6000, closely bound down—'the child shall never want,' he said. Your brothers are to have two thousand each, and you, Joan, are to marry Samuel."

"Does anything hang on that clause?" asked Joan, with a calmness that irritated Hester.

"I don't suppose that will be mentioned in the will at all," said Miss Carnsew. "Your uncle means it to be so, and I suppose imagines that he can arrange it as he pleases now."

"I will go down with you to tea, Aunt," said Hester, abruptly.

"My dear, don't say anything to your uncle about this. I am thankful that he has at least done something for you. I feared that he would not give even you more than a thousand pounds."

"I shall not say anything about it unless he does, said Hester.

"It is a most unjust thing!" cried Mary, indignantly. "It will be positively dishonest of Samuel if he takes it; for uncle would never have dreamed of doing anything of the kind before he got into his dotage."

"Samuel will take it certainly, and never trouble himself about that," Miss Carnsew said. "I am afraid he has worked for it for a long time now."

"But the land belongs to the Carnsews, not the Truscotts."

"There is nothing to bind it to them, you know. Nothing prevented the Carnsews, years ago, from selling a farm when they wanted a little ready money."

"But they clung to the house, Aunt Emily. That was never sold, nor the land around it; though I would rather have it sold, and the money flung into the sea, than see Samuel here in my father's place."

"No, no, not that!" protested the aunt. "It is a good thing to have money somewhere in the family, though you yourself may not happen to be the possessor of it."

Hester left her aunt and sisters, and, going to her room, found a small bottle labelled "laudanum." It was not full, and she looked at it hesitatingly for a minute; then went to her father's room, and opening a drawer, took out another bottle, and filling the one

she had brought, put it in her pocket again, and followed her aunt downstairs.

Mr. Carnsew was very quiet, making no attempt at conversation, and dozing now and then. During the evening, however, he fumbled with his pockets for some time, and then announced—

"I've lost my keys!"

"Lost your keys?" said his sister. "You have put them down somewhere, and forgotten them, I expect."

"Well, I haven't got them. I've been up to the garden to see what William is about there this afternoon, haven't I?—or was that yesterday?"

"To-day."

"Then I dare say I lost them there, or perhaps down on the beach. Samuel told me he just rode down and looked around there the other day, and he says the sea is working away that little bank, and we shall lose our piece of waste land there if we don't do something, He thinks a little wall would make it all right."

"I am sure the land would not be worth the cost of drawing the stones, without counting any other expense," said Miss Carnsew.

"I dare say you know a lot about it," said the gentleman. "But that won't find my keys for me, if I have left them there when I went down to see about it this afternoon."

"When did you use them last?"

"I've taken some medicine to-day, haven't I?"

"I don't know."

"I think I have. Then I had them upstairs in my cupboard."

"Shall I go up and see if they are there?" asked Miss Carnsew.

"No, I'll send up Jane."

"Don't send a servant; let Hester run up."

Hester was often allowed to do little things which her aunt was not permitted to do, and went upstairs.

She returned presently with the bunch of keys.

"So you have found them, my dear."

"Yes, Uncle, in the cupboard."

Her hand did not tremble as she passed them to her uncle, although she carried an empty bottle in her pocket.

"I shall go to Helmstanton to-morrow," she said to her aunt.

"To-morrow, my dear! They will not know you are coming, and your father is so busy about the hay that he will not like to leave the place for hours together."

"Emma will not mind being taken a little by surprise; and she has been expecting me for a fortnight at least. I can get on very well by myself. I could not think of hindering Papa to go with me at such a busy time."

"You must telegraph at the station to ask your cousins to send some one to meet you at Helmstanton. And, my dear," added Miss Carnsew, quietly, "I shall send you to the station; your father's horses are always so fly-away, and I shall feel more comfortable, too, if William is driving you."

"Thank you, Aunt. And he can wait an hour there, and I will telegraph back to say I have got comfortably to Helmstanton. Then I shall not feel obliged to write at once. You know how I dislike letter-writing."

"Which is very foolish of you. Of course we like to know what you are doing when you are away from home."

That night Hester arose and made her silent way through all the unoccupied rooms of the house, pausing in each to live over again some of the scenes that started into visions. She stayed long in the nursery where she and her brothers had romped together. Phil was not at home—he was gone from her for ever already!

She softly unfastened a side-door and went into the gardens. She carefully went over each well-kept, raised, grass-covered path, of which she was so fond.

"I never saw any others like them," she thought. "I suppose modern gardeners think gravel less trouble; or is it that in these degenerate days people are afraid they might get their feet wet if

their paths were covered with grass? But haven't they got their indiarubber shoes?"

When she reached the sun-dial she stopped and laid her cheek lovingly against the rough granite.

"You say nothing after sunset," she whispered. "Have you nothing to tell me to-night? I will ask you why a dial always makes one feel melancholy? Is it that you stand here, having outlived the purpose for which you were reared, offering in vain to show how the hours glide past to a generation replete with watches and clocks? Have you outlived your use and work? I do not think so, after all, for your mission does not seem extinct, only changed. You could never have been commonplace, Dial, like our watches, needing winding up with as great regularity as *we* need our meals: the sun always managed that for you—and you and he only condescended to enlighten inquirers at your pleasure. Perhaps the mystery is, that you are the monument to that eternity whose vitally interesting pages are only shown to us written in cipher. I am going away, Dial, but no fate can cut me off from my home, although I never see it again. I am a Carnsew, ready to do and to suffer for the others, so I have my right in it still!"

The hours that remained were too precious to be wasted in sleep, and though on returning to her room she lay down, that her limbs might rest in

preparation for her next day's journey, her eyes turned towards the open window to catch the first faint gleams of light upon the sea, and her ears listened for the first cawings of the rooks that sheltered in the trees around her home.

"Shall I do your packing for you?" asked Joan, after breakfast.

"Oh, I have done that myself, thank you."

"Packed for yourself!" exclaimed Mary, in astonishment.

"Every one must have a beginning," said Hester—which nobody could deny. "I left some shells and pebbles down on the rocks one day," she continued. "I think I will run down and get them."

"I will do that this afternoon, dear, if you will tell me where you put them," said Joan. "You ought to leave for the station in an hour, and it is not worth while for you to make yourself tired first."

"I would rather go myself; it is not far, and you would be sure not to find them."

Much as Hester wanted to spend the last minutes with her sisters, she was irresistibly drawn towards her old haunts upon the cliffs. It could be but a brief leave-taking, and she hurried across the meadows, scrambled over a hedge and ran down the steep banks, getting scratched by the prickly plants that grew amongst the spire-grass, and half filling her shoes with the loose sand as she went.

She checked herself suddenly when she reached the beach, for she stood face to face with her uncle. In a moment sea and sky, rock and home, were forgotten, and she and her deed were alone, and her tenderness for her uncle shook her soul, but not to wavering. The pity of the thing rose before her distinctly—the pity for him and for herself.

They stood—he in tottering age, she in bright youth—together on the brink of an awful, because mysterious, change: he all unconscious, she wondering, but courageous.

She stood silent, but Mr. Carnsew himself quickly broke that spell.

"Ho! ho! ho! ho!" he exclaimed, lifting up both his hands in mock astonishment, as if she was a little girl he was playing with. "And that's the way you take a walk, is it, Miss Hester?"

"Well it *was* more of a run," said Hester.

"I have come down to have another look at this place, and see about the wall," explained her uncle, to account for his unusual appearance on the beach at such an hour.

"But this is not the way home, Uncle," said Hester.

"I know that well enough, but I fancy there may be another wall needed on at the next bay, and I thought I might as well step on and look at that, too, while I was about it. Then I can ask Samuel

to see about it, when he comes over again, and the masons can make one job of the whole thing."

Hester had no reply to this, and her uncle continued, putting his hands upon her shoulders—

"So you are going off on a little pleasure trip. I hope you will enjoy yourself. William is going to drive you to the station, isn't he? I don't suppose I shall get back to the house before you are gone. I can't walk as fast as I used to be able to, somehow."

Then he fumbled in his pocket and produced his purse, and after drawing aside the steel rings with difficulty he took out a couple of sovereigns and gave to her, saying—

"Here's a little something to help you along, my dear. And 'tis high time you began to look out for a husband."

He said it seriously, and Hester did not laugh. She took the gold pieces, and watched till her uncle had tied his purse in a knot and put it away again; then she said, "Thank you, Uncle. Good-bye," and she held out her hand.

He was not a pleasant object to kiss, and the girls had given up doing it since they were children; but now after Hester had parted from him, and each had gone a few steps in opposite directions, she suddenly turned, and ran back to him.

"Good-bye, Uncle, good-bye!" she cried, putting

her arms round him, and kissing his wrinkled face again and again.

"Good-bye, my dear. I suppose you won't be long wanting," he said, and they separated once more.

She turned again presently to watch him as he staggered across the sands, then gave the first sob that had escaped her.

"He is like an old wrecked vessel battered and stranded by the storms of time: worse than useless, unconsciously doing harm, as the sunken hulk of the poor *Curlew* cut the pilchard-nets last year, and wasted the food that should have fed hundreds. Each ghastly relic is in the way."

She sat down on a rock to take off her shoes and shake the sand out of them. While beating the last on a stone, she looked up and saw a gentleman, who had descended a path close by, standing gazing fixedly at the sea till she should have finished. She hastily slipped on her shoes and rose.

Then he turned, and, raising his hat, said—

"Can you tell me if there is a footpath following the cliffs by which I can get to Salford?"

Hester, to her surprise and annoyance, felt that she was blushing.

"I imagine that there is a coastguard's path right round the kingdom," she said, coldly. "There is one here, at least: you can cross the bay in this

direction, and mount the cliff almost anywhere just opposite;" and she pointed out the direction.

He merely thanked her and passed on, but her two encounters so filled Hester's mind that she was half-way home across the meadows before she again thought of her shells.

"I have seen hundreds of tourists before," she thought, "but this is the first who ever spoke to me. It will never do for a Carnsew to encourage that sort of thing. It is very unpleasant having our privacy invaded in this way; yet it would be churlish to try to keep our beautiful rocks to ourselves, even if we had the right. There is one thing—I do believe he had the grace to blush a little too. And now I have forgotten my shells. I wonder if the girls will ever find them, or if they will stay there till the cliffs are washed away!"

When she reached the garden she heard the piano, and Joan's voice singing. A tumbled wave of broken recollections fell upon her.

"I cannot tell what it makes me remember," she thought, and she stole under the window to listen.

"Oh, rest in the Lord; wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee thy heart's desire," sounded in Joan's clear voice.

"Why is Joan singing that?" she wondered. "Mother used to teach her to sing it when she was a child. I remember now. Did Mother wait

patiently, I wonder? And what was her heart's desire? Joan sounds as if she meant what she is singing. Will the faith that I have missed ever come to *me?* Is my deed an answer to Joan's trust? Will it fulfil her heart's desire? How can it when she loses me in the obtaining? Is it possible that her desire and mine are different—not tending to the same ends? And if that be so, which of us is tending towards the best end? Well might Goethe cry for more light! A living faith without knowledge is impossible to me!"

There was but brief time for listening and for parting too. William was bringing the carriage round; and Miss Carnsew, who, however much she might object to losing any one, felt compelled to speed a departure, was crying, "Hester, are you ready? You will miss the train if you loiter too long."

"I can catch the next one, if I do," she said; but she dashed into the kitchen, to say "good-bye" to the maids, and then back to the hall door.

"Now be a good girl and behave yourself," said her father. "And don't go getting out of the train before it stops. Wait for the guard to open the door for you!

"Yes," joined Miss Carnsew, "there is no good in your saving half a minute by breaking your leg."

"I couldn't manage that. If I broke my leg I

shouldn't save the minute," replied Hester, making a desperate but unavailing attempt to laugh.

"Well, make haste and get in," said her aunt, "or you will be losing the train."

"Oh there is plenty of time," said Mr. Carnsew. "It will not take more than three-quarters of an hour to get to the station."

"Three-quarters of an hour!" exclaimed Miss Carnsew; "I should not like to be with anybody who did it in that time. The old carriage would be shaken to pieces; and I call it cruel to drive your horse so fast, especially over hills like these. And where is the good? It is as well to start in good time and not hurry."

"Hester dear, don't go leaving us without a letter for two or three days, like you did last time," said Joan, as she kissed her.

"A letter is nothing compared to my idea to-day," said Hester. "I am going to telegraph; so you will know at once of my safe arrival, and then you need not expect to hear again till it is time for me to come home."

"But, Hester, we get uncomfortable."

"That's foolish. What is good for nothing comes to no harm—that we all know."

"You have a fine day," said her father, putting her into the carriage. "My new hay-turner is working beautifully."

"I say, old girl," said Edwin, jumping on to the step and going on with her to send a word or two of reproach privately through the window, "you might have waited till I was gone again."

"I would have, if I could," she cried, and passionately kissed the hands that grasped the window frame.

Edwin looked a little foolish at the unusual display of affection, and said, "Well I can't see what the attraction is there. I shouldn't have said the girls were your form. Good-bye."

He sprang down, and Hester, after stretching out her arms through the window as the carriage turned out of the gates, in a wild farewell to the scattering group on the lawn, drew into a corner and cried for a minute—but only for a minute.

"I have no time for that now," she thought, turning to gaze at each familiar object as she was sped along.

The ponderous old carriage, which had conveyed Miss Carnsew about the country for the last thirty years, had been the butt of many a scornful jest from the girls; but it was now transformed into an object of tender reverence. When that was parted with and William, the last cord that connected her with her home was cut.

On her arrival at the station, the call for action roused her; but the bitter aching at her heart

remained, to grow, if possible, in intensity as she was whirled farther and farther through pleasant sunny banks and cool shady woods, where ferns and flowers gleamed with almost tropical extravagance.

Every train that dashed past gave a new thrust at her sore—Ah! what happiness to be going that way!

So on through the long day of changes and heat and misery. Was it possible that it was only a few hours since she had sat at breakfast in that life which was now so widely separated from her! Her telegram was gone—her last intercourse with all that had meant life to her before. So on into the bright moonlight night—away, away, with "never, never more," beating an eternal refrain upon her soul and brain.



CHAPTER X.

EXILE.

"And now I'm in the world alone,
Upon the wide, wide sea;
With thee, my bark, I'll swiftly go
Athwart the foaming brine!
Nor care what land thou bear'st me to,
So not again to mine."

CHILDE HAROLD'S PILGRIMAGE.

A CLOUDLESS sky, but not a monotonous one. The sun had just sunk; but the fiery ball had left bright lights behind him, gradually paling, yet still reflected on the scene below, lighting up, with rainbow hues, waves at the horizon, waves in the middle distance, waves in the foreground. There were motion and sound everywhere, but no speck of life except the little world on board the ship—no bird flashed across the sight, no fish raised his shining back above the water.

"The sun came up upon the left,
Out of the sea came he,
And he shone bright, and on the right
Went down into the sea;
Higher and higher every day,
Till over the mast at noon."

These lines were repeated to herself by a tall fair-haired girl as she leaned against the deck-rail gazing at sea and sky. Before the ship had left the dock the head-stewardess had sought among the emigrants a girl to help a lady with her children, and she had offered to take the duty. Her two charges played near her on the quarter-deck, and, amusing each other, left her free to follow her own thoughts.

It was the quiet quarter of an hour before dinner when the deck was comparatively empty of human beings. The bell rang, a cabin door or two slammed and men and women strolled past her. Several glances were turned in her direction, but they were quiet and unobtrusive; for there was that about her—nurse-girl as she was—that made men treat her with the respect they would have given an equal. She soon had the deck to herself, and, crossing it, leaned her arms upon the opposite rail. "I have walked from day into night," she said: and in truth they were moonlit waters that she now looked upon—the swelling sapphire billows of the mighty Atlantic, each with its diadem of diamonds flashing back the pale silver light.

"The sun's rim dips, the stars rush out:
At one stride comes the dark.
.
The moving moon went up the sky,
And nowhere did abide:
Softly she was going up and a star or two beside;
Her beams bemocked the sultry main,
Like April hoar-frost spread."

The girl repeated again. "I wonder why scraps from 'The Ancient Mariner' are always running through my head."

Then a slight shiver ran through her, and she looked at no moon or sea, but instead, amongst the phosphorescent sparks that flashed up the ship's side, she saw a group of wondering, anxious faces, all seeking something.

"Nay! it is better that you should stay puzzled than find out the truth. Ignorance is not bliss, but knowledge would be agony. Do they suspect anything? If Joan knew all, would she think her freedom too dearly purchased? But indeed it is not. Even for me to be an outcast, utterly alone on the face of the earth, is far better than for you to pass your life chained to a monkey, watching him indulging his malice against your dearest friends, while you are powerless to prevent him!"

Then another face belonging to the group, yet outside it, presented itself, wrinkled and pale, with a half-stupid-looking projecting under-lip. It was not

a naturally unkind face, nor did it look harshly at her.

"No," she thought, "you are not puzzled. You either know all or nothing. I feel that you are nearer me than all the others—nearer than anything else?"

Hast thou not chained thyself for life to Death, Hester?



CHAPTER XI.

LOOKING BACK.

"Who knows if he be dead?
Whether I need have fled?
Am I guilty of blood?"

MAUD.

ONE story more, Lucy, please; I'm not asleep."

"Yes, one story more, Silly Billy," chimed in another little voice like an echo, from another little cot.

The girl had put out the candle, but there was still light enough from the fire to see the concentration of her face; and the impatient weariness of her voice could be heard as she repeated the childish story which she had improvised long ago, in response to the children's perpetual demands for amusement.

"Now the little Tin Soldier, Lucy."

The Tin Soldier was succeeded by "Cock Robin"

and "The House that Jack Built," the latter being voluntarily offered as a stirrup-cup, the constant repetition of the burden of the story being well calculated to send drowsy listeners to sleep.

"The cock that crowed in the morn" having failed to wake anybody, the fire was gently stirred into a brighter blaze, and, sitting down before it, she drew a newspaper from her pocket, and hastily turned it over and over till she lighted on an engrossing passage.

It was not one of the great London papers she held, nor was it published in the country where she now lived; but it was an English county paper, having a fair amount of general news interspersed with its local items. It bore a date of four months previous.

The paragraph that she read again and again was this—

"The funeral of the late Samuel Carnsew, Esquire, took place yesterday at Caervean. Although for many years the deceased gentleman had lived a very secluded life, the position his family has held in the county, and the melancholy accident which was the cause of his death, drew together a large concourse of people wishing to pay their tribute of respect by accompanying the remains to their last resting-place.

"The residence of Caervean and the surrounding

estates devolve upon Edwin Carnsew, Esquire (the nephew of the deceased gentleman), who has been residing there for some time, and is well known as one of the most active magistrates of the district."

"The king is dead! Long live the king!" groaned Hester, as she mechanically folded the paper and put it back into her pocket.

She lay with her face to the floor, and her clasped hands stretched out beyond her head, while bitter tears came slowly.

Surely there must have been some unacknowledged, unwished-for hope in her heart that was crushed out by the sudden sense of despair that overwhelmed her.

"I passed the Rubicon months ago," she thought, "yet in the press of a night-passage I hardly *felt* all that I was doing. Now the sun is up, and I can see that I am on the other side."

For the moment the thirst for the news of her home, that was at times so great that her brain seemed on fire, was quenched by this drop, and no questioning as to how, or what, arose in her mind; it could only take in, "It is done," with a sense of immeasurable bitterness. Yet there was no regret of the deed itself, only of its necessity.

Presently there came thoughts of her childhood, of her romps in the glorious old garden with her brothers, and of the days when her only troubles had

been a torn frock or a half-learnt lesson. Even those had not been great troubles at the time, for Joan had been an indulgent guardian. She felt a tender pity for the child so unconscious of what was before it. It seemed strange to her now that she could ever have been so perfectly happy.

"It was because I did not know," she thought. Then quickly followed the reflection, "May I not be miserable now because I do not know enough?" This was succeeded as quickly by the thought, "But I am miserable because of knowledge."

All her intercourse with her uncle rose before her. He had played with her when she was a little child, sometimes teasing her and sometimes making clumsy attempts to amuse her. He had given her sweetmeats and dolls then, and when she grew a little older he had taken her to Salford with him for an outing, giving her a shilling to spend. And she well remembered that once he took her down to the quay when the sea was rough, and let her stand so close to the edge that she had got drenched with spray; after which he took her back to the hotel and insisted on her drinking some brandy-and-water to keep herself warm; and then let her, a child of eight years old, drive him home, while he lay back and dosed in the summer sunshine. "Would that we had been upset and both killed that day!" she murmured. Then there had been the wild freedom of her visits

from school, during which she had scarcely marked the growing rigidity of her uncle's face; and then came those last few months when, as she felt now, she had been fighting against fate. They were more terrible to look back upon than they had been in reality, for she had no longer the hope that had helped her through them.

"But I ought to be glad," she thought, "rather than otherwise, that my love for my people has been put to such a sharp test, and that I have not shrunk from it." Then she tried to find consolation by thinking of Jephthah's daughter, and Iphigenia, and Esther, and Charlotte Corday, and the Hindoo women who choose to be burnt beside their dead husbands. But she reflected that all these had a short, if sharp, agony, "except Jephthah's daughter, and we don't know what was done to her." And so she returned to the blank, "It is done."

Then came again a frightful doubt that, with all her sacrifice, she might not have made her beloved ones happy. They might have been happy had they known her to be dead; but could they ever be happy only knowing her to be lost?

She had placed a carefully-worded note in her room, to be discovered whenever that search for anything to mark her course should take place. In this she had said she was going to leave them for ever, but promised to send them news of herself "in a year

or two, if possible." So they could not think her accidentally killed or murdered.

She lit her candle and carefully went through the paper again, looking for any notice of a "mysterious disappearance," or any advertisement in the agony column that might refer to herself; but there was no sign of her having been missed.

"They had either not found out that I was gone, or were keeping it as private as possible," she thought. "Oh, why am I so young! And now, Hester Carnsew, or Lucy Browning, or whatever you are, there is nothing left for you but endurance and work;" and, drawing a large work-basket full of stockings towards her, she began to darn the children's socks, and kept steadily at her task, though a tearless sob would shake her now and again, and the despair in her heart showed itself through her eyes.



CHAPTER XII.

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON.

"A spot of dull stagnation, without light
Or power of movement, seemed my soul,
Mid onward-sloping motions infinite."

TENNYSON.

HOW did Hester fare during the years that followed her flight from her home? They were indeed long ones: weary days, lengthening out into purposeless months, again drawn out into hopeless years.

At first she had worked hard, partly from necessity, partly to deaden the cravings of heart and brain that must remain unsatisfied. Now and again the pangs of *heimweh* were so keen as to be almost irresistible, but for the reflection that if she yielded to them there would be other pangs still more terrible to come.

Once she had ventured to send a letter to Joan, and it had been a relief for the time just to speak to her dear ones, though her words were vague and no answering cry could come back to her. She had carefully sent it to London to be posted by a fellow-servant who was returning to the old country.

For years not an echo had reached her from the lost home, and she did not even know if her sacrifice had borne good or evil fruit to those she had left behind. At length she came to a landmark in her life —she found her brother Edwin's name in the Army List. The very book became sacred to her afterwards, and she looked at the name every day.

At last the current of her life took another course, though at the time she scarcely realized the change. She had lived for some years with an old lady whose husband and children had died in New Zealand, and who had decided on returning to her friends and relations in Cape Colony. Mrs. Dunstan had conceived the idea of adopting her as a daughter, but Hester would not consent to be bound in any way, although she yielded so far to her wishes as to take the name of Dunstan instead of Browning.

The voyage itself was a great pleasure to her, partly from her love of the sea, and partly from the complete breaking up it caused of habits whose monotony had become a great weariness.

On landing at Port Elizabeth she transferred her

responsibilities to Mrs. Dunstan's nephew, Mr. Cairns, whose daughter joined them at Grahamstown. A six hours' drive brought them to the quiet upland district where she was to live.

On first seeing their house Hester wondered how it had ever sprung up in the wilderness around it. It stood on the side of a slope. About a mile and a half to the left, on the farther side of a watercourse, a grand precipitous cliff rose (called a "kranz" in the country), covered in places with bright bushy trees, the green of which was relieved by the grey rocks that showed amongst it.

One afternoon Hester stood at the window of the sitting-room and gazed on the scene before her.

Two clouds of striped crimson and gold glittered on a pale green sky, against which the ragged tops of snow-clad mountains showed themselves, bathed in a flood of rose-coloured light by the setting sun. The windows of the room where Mrs. Dunstan and Hester sat opened on a verandah, which led by three or four steps to a small garden, protected by a wire fence from the inroads of cattle, kids, and porcupines.

On one of the hillsides a herd of cattle was quietly grazing, but no other sign that the country belonged to man could Hester perceive. No house, no fence; the very footpaths were even lost among the stones or hidden by the shrubs.

There were two or three huts behind the house

where the herds and their families lived, and there were several enclosed kraals where the sheep and young cattle were penned in at night, and two roads led from the house to the world beyond.

"I am afraid that you have too much to do," said Mrs. Dunstan, after they had been silent awhile. "You are looking much paler than you used to do. I think I had better ask Andrew to get us a white servant, if he can, when he goes to town with his ostrich feathers next week."

"Please don't do it on my account," pleaded Hester. "Don't you think I shall want all the active employment I can get here? Or what am I to do with my time? I don't mind making a pudding or kneading the bread, and I have got to do that quite nicely already."

"Well, my dear, when the new 'spider' comes we shall be able to go about more, and then you will not feel so lonely."

In truth Hester was wondering how long she should be able to endure the solitude of those mountains and hills, those endless bushes, with their constant flutter of wing and flash of colour from the bright birds that went from one to another. She had not lived in the country since she quitted Caervean, and the sense of space was "a pleasure that with great pain was fraught."

Suddenly there was heard the barking of dogs, quickly

suppressed by a Kafir in language which, though it sounded strange to Hester's ears, was not unmusical to her. Then a light, quick footstep was heard coming through the garden, and presently a girl of seventeen appeared, and came up the steps at a run. She was just as tall as Hester, to whom she turned with energy after she had kissed Mrs. Dunstan. "Mamma and Clare are gone to Dunkeld to-day, and Mr. John Davenant came to the house to know if we had any strange ostriches here, and he told me his mother is going to give a dance at Christmas. There is nobody at home, and it is such misery not to have anybody to speak to, that I was obliged to come over and tell you about it. You can't think what a splendid house it is for a dance, Lucy—I may call you Lucy, mayn't I? If Mrs. Dunstan is Aunty, Miss Dunstan may surely be Lucy? Well, the house has ever so many rooms in it, and some are really large. Mrs. Davenant turns the whole place upside down, and there is such a nice supper. I never used to be able to eat any supper at a dance; but now I am getting to find it pays one. You can go on so much longer. And guess what, Lucy—some officers have promised to come over from King William's Town, if they can manage it, and a nephew of Mr. Davenant's is expected from England to spend a few months with them; so there will be plenty of strangers."

Then becoming aware that, though she had talked

her listeners dumb, she had not worked Hester quite up to her own point of interest, she asked—

"But perhaps you don't dance?"

"Oh, yes, she does," said Mrs. Dunstan. "I don't mind betting you six pairs of gloves to one, that she has more partners than you have."

"Will you? I am always ready for a bet. Six pairs of gloves! Why I shall be set up for ever so long, and John Turner is owing me two pairs now from the races the other day. I knew his old horse wouldn't win. I wonder if Lucy dances like some of the English people who come out, or like we do? Some of them are impertinent enough to say we trot. But I can't see that we do, any more than they do. I'm an Africander, and I'm proud of it, and if my dancing doesn't please Britishers they can leave me alone—poor miseries that half of them are too—there are plenty of our own men that are only too glad to get me for a partner," and she whirled herself round the room.

Hester looked with admiration at the lithe figure in its well-fitting light dress and Paris shoes.

"If you do as well with any one else as alone, I can well believe it," she said.

"Oh, I don't know," grumbled Agnes, suddenly changing expression and tone. "I dare say you will beat me; you will be quite new to them all, and they will never have seen your dress before."

"Well I won't dance, if you like. Very likely we shall not be invited to the party."

"Oh, yes, you will. And you must dance. I was talking to John Davenant about you, and he said his mother was coming over to see Aunty."

"But won't you have a new dress, too?" asked the aunt.

"No. Mamma is going to take Clare and me to a real ball in town, and, as it is my first, I am to have a white silk for that, which will have to do duty again at the Davenants. But I shall trim it with something coloured then, I am sure, for dead white will be horrid for me."

"A ball in town! Lucy, we must go to it. Agnes, have you heard your father say anything about a pair of horses for us?"

"No, Aunt Mary."

"I have asked him to get me a pair of cart-horses, and I shall be glad if you will tell him this evening that they may as well be broken to carry a lady, too."

"Yes. Can you ride, Lucy?"

"Oh yes!" Hester exclaimed, hurriedly, remembering with anguish that the last time she had been on a horse she had shared it with Edwin.

"You can do everything," said Agnes, a little disappointed. "There seems to be nothing for us to show you how to do."

"I have never driven two horses," said Hester,

recovering herself, "and I shall like to learn very much."

"That is so easy," said Agnes, "you won't want any teaching at all. I must go home now, or it will be getting dark; and perhaps I shall find that Marie has let half the children fall into the tank. There is a wild-gooseberry bush growing close to the gate, on purpose to tempt them to the spot. It ought to be dug up, but never gets done, and I dare say it will stay there till one of them gets a ducking and spoils the water."

"We will take you to the top of the hill," said her great-aunt. "Did the dogs frighten you when you came past the huts?"

"No. Lang-Jan came out and threw a couple of stones at them, and they were quiet at once."

"I don't like her at all," thought the unlamblike Agnes as she shook hands with Hester. "Clare likes her, but I don't. She doesn't seem to care about anything; but I shouldn't mind betting my last new hat to an ant-stung peach, that she manages to get the best of everything going. She looked quite dangerous when I asked her if she could ride —and that's a harmless question enough, I should think."

To Hester everything was new, and Agnes scarcely received more than a passing thought from her. The isolation of the new home she had found, and

Mrs. Dunstan's attempts to do everything she could to make her comfortable and happy, seemed a mockery of the childhood she had lost. The great alteration in her mode of life even produced a sense of expectancy that greater changes were before her.

"Why cannot I live for other people and be content to quietly devote myself to Mrs. Dunstan, who is so good to me," she would reason to herself, "and feel satisfied with the completeness of my sacrifice, without longing and longing for what is impossible? Suppose I went back now, perhaps they would not be glad to have me even—and what could I say to them? I wish my sacrifice had not only cut all the ties I had, but prevented my ever being able to form new ones. Yet why must I be solitary? If what I did was good, not evil, why should it cut me off from the closest friendships of life? I suppose it is because I could not honourably marry any man, even if he were willing to take me upon trust, without telling him my past history—and the world is not yet educated up to my standard." Why did she hesitate to add "the more is the pity!" Was some doubt of her own wisdom beginning to creep into her mind?

CHAPTER XIII.

KISMET.

"Full desertness
In souls as countries, lieth silent—bare
Under the blenching vertical eye-glare
Of the absolute heavens."

E. BARRETT BROWNING.

ALL the neighbours called on Mrs. Dunstan — that is, the upper ten within fifteen miles drove over and spent the day with the Cairnses, and paid a visit of a couple of hours at "The Cottage."

When the horses and "spider" arrived Hester was soon taught to drive a pair, and she and Mrs. Dunstan had rather a busy month in jolting over the country roads to return the civilities.

Mrs. Dunstan felt that Hester was likely to be popular in the district, and quietly rejoiced at it.

Hester's good looks did much for her in that respect —admiration certainly points out the way to liking.

Hester, too, felt the difference in her position. She had always gone wherever Mrs. Dunstan had; but she had been quite aware that she was frequently classed among the "young personhood." And though her sense of being a Carnsew, and her utter indifference to the people she met, had prevented her from ever being sore or angry, now, wherever she went, she found herself treated as the guest whom it delighted the host and hostess to honour; and the change could not fail to give her a feeling of satisfaction.

Mrs. Dunstan did not pass her over to be chaperoned at the ball by Mrs. Cairns, but carried her to town herself.

"I like to see the young people merry together, and I shall enjoy watching them just as much as they will giving me something to watch," she said, when her niece offered to take Hester off her hands for the occasion.

"Ja," said Mr. Cairns, "if lookers-on see most of the game, we ought to get some satisfaction out of our part of the play even now that we have got through the more lively of our own acts."

"But have you given up dancing, Andrew?" asked Mrs. Dunstan.

"Rather. But Loote does enough for two in that

line. I suppose you mean to dance?" looking at his wife.

"If I am asked, that I will," she answered.

"I dare say one or two young fellows will think it wise to give you a turn or two for the sake of your daughters."

"Why shouldn't they for myself? I am not so old yet that I am too stiff to dance."

"Toch! I should think not," exclaimed Agnes. "Though you are a dead weight upon a horse, you know, Mamma—I always say so. But you will go on longer than Clare now. It's true Clare doesn't care half enough about dancing any more!" exclaimed the girl again.

"I don't see the fun of dancing every dance just because you will do it, and tiring yourself out for a week," said Clare.

"Ach, Clare! it's because you like sitting-out some of them on the verandah," said her mother.

"Clare has a thought about looking fresh at breakfast the next morning when Frank appears," said her father, looking lovingly upon his eldest daughter.

"Well I hope Lucy means to enjoy herself in the room, and not go star-gazing too much so that the next day she doesn't know if Lady Hofmeyer had on peagreen or vermilion."

"If anybody kindly points out Lady Hofmeyer to me," said Lucy, "I don't think I have astronomical

tastes strong enough to prevent my knowing what she has on."

"Well that is something," said Agnes. "When I say, 'Wer'n't her ear-rings just lovely?' and Clare says, 'Had she on ear-rings?' I get sick of it. What's the good of going to a ball if you can't talk about it afterwards? She might as well stay at home and amuse herself by playing Nelly Bly or Old Dog Tray."

"At present I would rather go to a ball," said Clare, quietly.

When Hester walked up the steps of the Town Hall, Agnes, whose excitement made talking a necessity, was chatting to her. But the remembrance that she was "not to star-gaze," and the beautiful night, drew her attention to the heavens, and Agnes's prattle fell on unheeding ears; which mattered little, as she wanted to talk and cared for no answers.

Then in a minute Hester realized that some one was introducing her to Lady Hofmeyer.

"She has on ear-rings, but they are nothing special," thought the girl, as she sat down by Mrs. Dunstan and turned her face to the dead wall of the throng of figures in the room.

Clare had gone off with her lover to take her place in one set, while Agnes had been claimed to fufil a month-old engagement for the first dance in another.

"How did Bacon learn so well what the lack of friendship was, I wonder?" thought Hester. "What

can be truer than when he says, 'Little do men perceive what solitude is, and how far it extendeth. For a crowd is not company, and faces but a gallery of pictures, and talk but a tinkling cymbal, when there is no love. It is a mere and miserable solitude to want true friends, without which the world is but a wilderness.'"

"Miss Dunstan, may I introduce my cousin Bevil—Mr. Thurstan, to you?"

The speaker was John Davenant, and Hester, turning, saw a tall dark-complexioned stranger bending to her. As she looked her mind received a shock; she felt salt June breezes on her forehead, and a vision of long stretches of bright sand and blue depths of rippling sea blotted out the crowd around her—not a distinct vision, but, as it were, the last look at a dissolving view when the next one begins to blur it.

"I hope you are not engaged for the next waltz, and will give me the pleasure of dancing with you?"

"I shall be most happy," she said, with more of interest in her voice than usual.

"I think we have met before," said Mr. Thurstan, as they moved together up the room. "I hope you will forgive my not remembering where. The way you looked up seemed to call back a dream that is so far forgotten as only to leave its shadow behind."

"Yes?" she answered. "Perhaps it was in one of

our previous existences. I don't think it can have been in this one."

He looked at her curiously. "Certainly not—if you have never been away from the Cape. I only arrived here yesterday, and have never been before."

"I have come from New Zealand," she said, blushing a little at this truth with half a lie in it.

"I have never been there." Then, after a pause, "So you believe in previous existences?"

She hesitated. She certainly was not in the habit of discussing beliefs.

"What is impossible?" she answered; and then, seeking shelter behind some one else's authority, she added, "Wordsworth is one of the apostles of that doctrine, isn't he? I believe nothing."

Then she felt rush upon her that chilliness of manner that often made her as unwelcome as a passing iceberg.

"I have no opinions."

It was not a simple statement of a fact; it was a closing of the subject.

"I think you are mistaken about yourself," he said, but went no further. "Those fellows are keeping splendid time; shall we begin?"

Hester tried hard to keep the frost out of her voice when they stopped, and she had a chance of speaking again.

"I suppose I must hardly venture any remarks

upon the people present," said Bevil Thurstan, "since I am told everybody in the colony is aunt, uncle, sister, brother, or first, second, or third cousin, to everybody else."

"It is not quite so bad as that. And you need not fear treading on my toes. I don't know many people here, and I have been in the neighbourhood too short a time to have adopted a violent prejudice either for or against any of them, I think."

"It doesn't take long to do that. You are crushing them in a body when you declare their inability to move you to hatred or love."

"Or myself, by declaring my inability to be moved."

"Don't presently think it was I who made that last remark," he said, laughing.

Before Hester could reply, she was claimed by another partner for the next dance. It was only after the third that she returned to Mrs. Dunstan.

"Well, my dear," said the old lady, "you seem to be doing your best to save my gloves."

"Yes, my programme is filling."

"May I look at it?" asked Bevil Thurstan, who had been talking with Mrs. Dunstan. "You will give me a dance or two more, I hope?"

"If you wish for them."

When he returned her programme she saw that he had marked three dances.

It was a memorable evening for Hester from the speed with which it passed. Bevil Thurstan's two dances seemed to come quite soon, and she was glad to have them, for he danced well.

After the first they stood by one of the open windows. "This is better than using your fan," he said. "You never told me anything about the people here, after all."

"Oh, but it was you who were to make the remarks. I was only intending to give you a little encouragement. By this time, I dare say you know as much of the ladies present as I do."

"No, I have danced but little."

"Well, can you point out the country girls from the town girls?" asked Hester.

"It would be mere guess-work," he said. "There are no girls here who are dressed in their grandmothers' clothes, or have on badly-made imitations of last year's fashions."

"These eastern province towns are very rural in their character, of course," said Hester, "notwithstanding their being centres of such large districts. But one would expect to see some difference between girls who live in a house three or four miles from any other, and those who see shops every day of their lives."

"To which genus do you belong?" he asked. "I don't know."

"I am living forty miles in the country now, but I have not been there long."

"Is it near Davenant's place? I haven't been out there yet."

"Yes, we are neighbours. It is an hour from Groenbosch, I am told. Distance is counted by time here, as perhaps you know. I fancy that about six miles is called an hour; but I should think it would depend a good deal on your horse, and some of the roads are much worse than others."

"I am glad we take the same direction."

"Do you stay long?" asked Hester.

"That depends. If I get well amused I may stay some months. I suppose there will be plenty of buck-shooting; but it is no good to hope for bigger game so far down as this."

"I fancy the few tigers that are left," said Hester, "are never met with except when some one manages with great skill and patience to induce one to step into a steel trap. Still there is one chance of excitement for you: if you like to walk through somebody's ostrich camp there is a probability that you might have a lively encounter and be kicked into a jelly, or driven into some miserable little tree and kept there for hours. But I hope," she continued with energy, "you are not one of those unfortunate men who have no business in life but to wear out time and their own miserable existences together."

"Why is it less noble to live in that way than to devote one's energies to the making of money as well as the spending of it? However, at present I hold the very important position of a briefless barrister. Luckily my bread and salt do not exactly depend upon my getting briefs. But I mean to work at something when I go back; and I shall do it, I believe, none the worse for my few months' holiday."

Hester was thinking, "I wonder if he has ever seen Philip. I suppose this kind of people mix a good deal with each other."

She felt that she should ask the question if she stood still, and she turned from the light of the room to the balcony. They crossed it, and stood leaning against the railings, looking down into the broad, dim street below.

"Will you tell me," he said, almost more as if he was speculating on it than asking a direct question, "why you were looking so sad when I saw you first to-night? Everything around you was gay; yet you seemed to be looking out of it all. Do you know I thought it was the saddest face I had ever seen."

Hester almost shook the railings in the effort to keep down her anger. What right had a stranger to talk to her so? What concern of his was it how she chose to feel? Then again, with a sudden change, she thought, "What stranger had ever cared to do it before?"

"I beg your pardon. Will you forgive me?" he said, as she turned upon him. "You rightly think one who has known you so short a time is impertinent to ask you such a question. I am sorry I did it."

"You need not be that," she said. "I can only tell you I was sad because I *was* sad. A woman's reason, you will say." But her voice had no anger in its tone.

"Ah!" said a quick voice at the window behind them, which Hester at once recognized as that of Agnes's, "history tells us that St. Dunstan was a queer kind of saint; and people say history constantly repeats itself, don't they? Who promised to confine her observations to earthly objects to-night? Well, never mind now. Aunt is searching for you; but I told her I knew there was a balcony here. She is wanting to leave now. We are all going. I think Mamma might have stayed for a few extra dances; but Clare, of course, doesn't care about it."

"We have not had our last dance," said Bevil Thurstan.

"But I think other people have had it," answered Hester.

"I've won my six pairs of gloves though—that is something, isn't it? I haven't missed one," said Agnes.

"And I danced neither the first nor last," said Hester.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN OLD STORY.

"I will construe to them whence you come: who you are and what you would, are out of my welkin."—TWELFTH NIGHT.

ESTER knew instinctively that Bevil Thurstan felt an interest in her, an interest that was not simply pity. Pure pity she would have rejected with anger —she did not like it or want it. However, that he should feel an interest in her was not in itself wonderful; she had moved other people's sympathies before. But what struck her with some awe was that her own had been moved.

The more she thought about it—and she thought a good deal—the more she became sure that they had met before. It seemed hopeless to try to remember where; for all her puzzling brought her no

further than when one has a word on one's lips and yet it dies before it can be seized and spoken. She had no recollection of the name; that never returned as an echo when she repeated it trying to feel her way by it through the maze. It was Hester Carnsew that knew him, she thought; and for a moment a cold horror ran through her that she might have drunk of the waters of Lethe, and that all those things she thought she remembered—that old house, that father, and those brothers and sisters, were only phantoms, the fantastic patchwork of a disordered mind. Had she ever been Hester Carnsew? Had she ever lived that other life? Had she not read the outlines of the story, and in some terrible illness woven it into herself? "It is all true. I will believe it." She felt that her brain was staggering. "Help! help! let me not go down into the pit of insanity," her very soul pleaded.

To what did she cry? She did not know or think at the time, but she claimed aid as she had done once when she was a child, when, during bathing, she had been nearly strangled by a wave that had swept her out of her depth before the next with as mighty force had carried her gasping back to the sand.

She shook off the dread that had fallen upon her, but the terror of it left her white and trembling. She sought for a precious relic to strengthen herself with. It was a photograph of her father surrounded

by his children, herself and Edwin on stools in the midst.

"That is no lie," she thought. "What a fool I am to let such an idea as that scare me for a moment, just because I have met a man and can't remember where I have seen him before. Isn't he in exactly the same position? Can he tell where he saw me? It does not trouble him, and he is surely sane enough! Am I got so weak that the faintest breath of a wind that blew on Hester Carnsew must blow down Lucy Dunstan?"

Then came the anxious question, "Does he know Philip? Is there any way that I can find out? Of course I shall see him again on Wednesday, and I must try if I have the chance, or I shall reproach myself with a lost opportunity as long as I live."

Her mind was so full of the excitement of this hope of hearing her brother mentioned by some one who had seen him since she had, that she had but scant attention to bestow upon the pile of new books Mrs. Dunstan had brought back from the town. She liked Hester to read aloud to her—to save her own eyes, she said, though in reality they were strong enough. Besides, if they went through a book together they found more in it to talk about; and, after so many years spent in a town, she was beginning to find living in the country rather duller than it had been when she was a girl.

The day after their return home Mrs. Dunstan lay on the sofa in a shady corner of the sitting-room, which Hester had tried to model from her sister's drawing-room at Caervean. The floor she had stained a dark brown, and polished beautifully. For rugs she had the skins of two tigers that had been shot by Mrs. Dunstan's father many years before, some handsome dark jackal skins joined together, and a lovely white Angora goat skin, pure and silky. The walls were papered, and the ceiling, which was of wood, was painted to match the wood-work of the room.

There were a few water-colours and brackets—these last being Mrs. Dunstan's work, not Hester's, who although she had learnt to darn stockings, make children's frocks and even her own, could never get fond of fancy-work, and rarely tried any.

She had filled the grate with troughs of maiden-hair ferns, and several other pots with flowers stood in odd corners. In one recess there was a handsomely carved bookcase, with a side-table underneath it, while in another stood the piano. The chairs were few, but comfortable, the sofa well padded and low. Being the only parlour in the house, it had to serve as both dining and sitting-room; so Hester was obliged to put up with a square table as a centre ornament.

Sitting on a footstool at the side of the sofa,

Hester cut the leaves of a fresh volume and began to read.

"How those dogs bark!" she exclaimed presently, stopping herself. "I believe if a Kafir walked along the top of the hill they would begin."

"I like them to bark, my dear. I am not nervous, and I don't wish to make you so; but if you had lived here thirty years ago, you would have felt that it was something to be sure of having notice when a Kafir came on the hill."

"But, after all," said Hester, "I believe there is somebody a little nearer now."

Instead of going to the door, as Hester expected, some one opened the window and walked into the room from the verandah.

It was rarely that Hester had anything flowing or loose about her. Her dress, though frequently rich, always seemed to retire from the eye rather than catch it. There were never any loose ribbons about it; the skirts scarcely did more than touch the ground; her sleeves were close-fitting, and even when she wore flowers in her hair they were never hanging sprays, but closely pinned to her braids.

That afternoon, however, feeling weary from her journey, she had unbraided her hair, which had grown much longer and brighter than it had been in her early girlhood. A band of the palest shade of blue satin ribbon, to match her dress, kept it from

falling over her face; but as she sat it had spread itself on the floor, from the shining surface of which it was reflected, as a golden cloud on still water.

"Möchte doch!" thought Mr. Cairns, as he came in, followed by Bevil Thurstan; "I don't wonder at the fellow's turning this way when he was out in the blazing sun. He might go farther and fare a good deal worse. 'He that humbleth himself shall be exalted,'" he said aloud, stretching out his hand to help her to rise.

"Rather, 'He that is down need fear no fall,'" replied Hester.

She blushed painfully as she greeted the visitors. She felt that it was all very well for a girl of sixteen or seventeen to wear her hair loose, but for a woman of twenty-three or twenty-four it was an aping of a juvenility no longer hers. She would not have minded that generally, but she had been shaken out of the indifference she had so long wrapped round herself.

As she touched Bevil Thurstan's hand she raised her eyes for a moment to his face, and thought she saw the faintest sympathetic tinge there. Instantly she knew where she had seen him. He was the stranger who had caught her shaking out her shoes on the beach the day that she had fled from Caervean. Was he fated always to come upon her when at a disadvantage? Then came a thought which was

almost a hope, that as he had flashed across the close of her old life, his appearance might herald in another and happier stage. Yet what happiness could there be in store for her?

"We did not hear your horses. Did you come on horseback?" she asked Mr. Cairns, by way of saying something.

"I should think so. Don't you know by this time that every Africander will walk five hundred yards to fetch his horse to ride two hundred?"

"But surely you don't fetch your own horse?" said Hester making a lively picture to herself of the dignified sheik racing after a herd of galloping steeds.

"No; I don't keep dogs and do the barking myself."

"I thought it was not likely," said Hester.

"Davenant's rascals have lost some of his young birds again, while he was in town. Mr. Thurstan's inquiring about them. You haven't seen any about, I suppose? They might have come to this homestead."

"No; there have not been any here that I know of."

And Hester, glad to make her escape from the room, retreated to roll up her hair in a modest coil at the back of her head. Then, shy of appearing at once with such an alteration, she took her hat, and on passing the dining-room she opened the door and

said to Mrs. Dunstan, without entering, "I am going to see if I can find any figs for tea," and shut it again.

When she got to the verandah, she found Bevil Thurstan had come out through the window.

"I may go too, and help, mayn't I?" he said.

They crossed a narrow strip of level ground at the side of the house, and stood at the gate of the garden, looking down the "kloof," the hollow which ran below the rising ground on which the house stood. It had been a close, sultry day, of intense dry heat, a day when all windows and doors must be closed from eight o'clock in the morning. All the afternoon there had been distant thunder, and a few drops of rain had fallen, but had dried up almost as they fell on the scorching stones. Then a cooler wind had come up, taking away all chance of rain that day. But among the mountains grand storms were playing.

Some of the nearer hills were mere dense black masses, kloof and kranz being blended and lost in the heavy shadows; but behind, again, one group of distant mountains stood out a wondrous sight to see. A light fell directly on them, bathing them in a greenish glow, and touching the topmost peaks with a brightness that looked like snow. *Here* nothing was hidden, every cleft was marked by a greenish purple shadow, and every pinnacle stood out quite distinct but inexpressibly soft.

"If I had not taken particular notice of that mountain half an hour ago, I should have thought it was covered with snow," said Bevil.

"It is lovely!" said Hester. "I have never seen it with that light on it before. It changes almost as much as the sea. Isn't the sun pitiless! He is showing us the very heart of the mountains. I have never seen that great circular kloof and those jagged ridges till now."

"Isn't the sun kind!" he said. "He is showing us beauties we could hardly have dreamed of."

She was so intent upon what she saw that she scarcely seemed to hear him speak, and only the next minute to realize that he was with her.

"They are two long days' journey on horseback from us," she said; "but don't they look near? And yet there is something about them that you feel as if you could never reach if you travelled for ever."

"One would lose the effects from your beautiful clear air by getting close, but I think the glories of the mountains would still be grander. Distance lends enchantment, but reality is often still beyond that. Do you paint?"

"Yes, I often sketch the hills, but I could never get that picture. Look what a soft grey. The sky is just above them, quite light, and yet such a rich depth of tone. And then those points against it—they have scarcely more or less colour than the sky

they touch; yet how clear they are, but with no harsh boldness. The subtle difference of the shades baffles me, though the hues are distinct enough."

"Will you try? Then I shall beg something more, and ask you to let me have the sketch."

"It will be a smear," said Hester.

"That is a promise. I suppose your mountains have names?"

"Your mountains!" To Hester *her* mountains meant Roughtor and Brown Willy, and the rugged old tors that were grouped on the lonely moors in far-away Cornwall, where the Cheesewring and the Hurlers stood in proud defiance of time. For a moment she was inclined to disclaim the hills before her; but she thought better of it, and answered—

"Yes, that one we have been looking at is the Katberg. There are several ranges more to the east, but they are very shadowy just now; you can hardly make them out."

But while they looked, behold! the warmth died out of the sky above the Katberg, the grey turned to a heavy lead colour, the light faded from the peaks, they rushed out of sight, the lowering cloud brooded over them a moment and the mountain was gone—washed out by the torrents that streamed down its sides. But the rift in the clouds spread away to the eastward, and lit up one peak after another while Hester pointed them out.

"That conical one rising behind the others like a sugar-loaf is Gaika's Kop. That one which stands up so boldly as if it had broken away from the rest of the range—the one which has now got the light on its cloven head—is called the Hog's Back. There is a range farther back still called the Amatolas, but you cannot see them."

"They might have prettier names. They deserve them."

"I dare say they have in Kafir language. Amatola is the only Kafir word I know; and that is much prettier, I think, than our word 'calf,' which is what it means."

"Yes."

Hester began to wonder, as they went to the long line of fig-trees, if she ought to make an opportunity for the conversation to turn upon her brother. She knew she could not force it that way, and was almost afraid to make the slightest attempt to lead it, for she dared not think how she should bear her disappointment if she heard nothing to interest her; and yet she knew that she could not show a disposition to talk to Bevil Thurstan about his surroundings in England without betraying some great interest in them, or appearing impertinently curious. "If there is the least opening I will follow it," she thought.

The garden was not orderly. The fence had

several corners that showed no *raison d'être*. Probably the enclosure was originally very small, and had been several times added to without any regard to its shape.

In one of the corners there was a little spring dammed up to form a small pond, and by this grew a couple of fine old willows. Besides the fig-trees there was a hedge of quince-trees, and a couple of short rows of vines, and scattered amongst the potatoes and pumpkins were half a dozen orange-trees, and here and there an apple or a pomegranate or banana. There were large patches where nothing at all was cultivated now, and already some little bushes and prickly-pear leaves were to be seen making head.

"Your garden is not at all like the Groenbosch one," said Bevil Thurstan.

"No. I know the Groenbosch garden. The paths are always to be distinguished from the beds. All the trees are in straight lines, and well pruned. There is a four-horse pump for irrigation, and everything is in apple-pie order. There are advantages connected with that state of things, of course—the birds and ourselves could easily do with more fruit than we get here, and it is not convenient to have to do without vegetables except when we can get them from town; but still, on the whole, I like this one better than the Davenants'. I don't think I can

quite keep up with the modern perfection of things. I should like this garden to be better kept, but I would rather have our jumble than their tidiness. I wonder if the wind would take the liberty to split their banana leaves into such a fringe as that one is?"

"I fancy you will find the wind no respecter of tidiness. You will see the banana leaves fringed in the same way at Groenbosch as here. But I do confess to a liking for the way that date-tree throws its head up all alone, and the pomegranates are a brave sight with their dark leaves and fruit just turning scarlet. What is this growing in amongst it?" he asked, pulling off a piece of a parasite with sage-green leaves and full of berries.

"That? Oh, that is South African mistletoe. Haven't you seen it before? Those berries will be a bright red in a week or two. I think it is as pretty as English mistletoe, but of course it lacks all the traditional interest of the Druids."

"Well, Christmas is very different out here from ours at home," he said, "with scarlet mistletoe instead of white, and the heat of Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace out of doors. I wonder if you can fully realize all that Christmas is to us. The frost and snow, the roaring fires and warm rooms, seem almost a part of the festival."

"Not realize the difference between an African

and an English Christmas! Can my right hand forget her cunning?" mentally exclaimed Hester.

"I almost think I can," she said, with a sadness in her voice which his ear instantly caught. "The fields covered with snow, the sheep looking miserable and grimy in it, the trees with their twigs all sparkling with crystals. The people, who have been cramped up, and whose feet are half-numb with the cold in the church—where the vicar has mercifully given them only a short sermon—stand outside the porch; and, while their faces are getting blue with the east wind—which seems to find each one out, however he may try to get his neighbour between it and himself—they cheerfully wait to wish each other the greetings which mean so little, but would be so much missed if they did not come. You see my imagination only takes me to the country, and I dare say you spend your Christmases in London, where snow means slush in the streets, and damp working in through the roofs, doesn't it?"

This wind-up was a feeler.

"I generally spend it with my friends in the country. I tried to keep it once at my place in Yorkshire, but I have no kith near enough to make it a duty for them to come to me then; so it was rather a dismal affair, and I have thought it wiser since to make one of those units who help to swell other people's families at that season."

"I should like," said Hester, boldly taking her leap, "to see one of your dinners. Somebody has told me that the chief work of a student of law is to eat a certain number of dinners in a certain place during the year. Upon those occasions you must have an immense variety of men collected together."

"Yes, there is room enough between John O'Groats and the Land's End to turn out several kinds of fellows. I am afraid you are determined to believe me a lazy do-nothing who only pretends to work."

"You must get a big Q.C. and prove me wrong. Not that you need to do that though. I don't really think you are."

"I am glad to have that assurance."

Hester was wondering if "The Land's End" might not be made to introduce Cornishmen; but Bevil said—

"I am disappointed in your rivers. Your Great Fish River looks to me nothing more than a stream now, though I hear it is often very different when it is flooded."

"The country does not belong to me," Hester said, somewhat testily, goaded, by the hopeless turn in the conversation, to the expression of her feelings of repudiation. "We have figs enough now, I think." She was bitterly disappointed, and reproached herself for having tried to hurry the conversation where she should have simply gone with it.

"And now I cannot touch upon the people he knows again; my very impatience has put that more out of the question than it would have been else. My only chance now is that he may light on the topic himself at some other time."

Meanwhile Mr. Cairns had somewhat startled Mrs. Dunstan out of her usual placidity by quietly remarking, as Bevil Thurstan shut the window behind him—

"That fellow's a gone coon on your girl. I wonder if they will have it out down among the figs!"

"I should think not," cried the lady, indignantly. "They have never seen each other but that night at the ball."

"That is not the slightest reason why they should not. A cat doesn't walk round a dish of cream a hundred times before she tries to get at it."

"But they don't know anything about each other," protested Mrs. Dunstan.

"Oh ja!" said Mr. Cairns, making use, as he often did, of the Dutch affirmative. "You and I may be able to see objections by the score, but you don't suppose they are going to think anything of that, do you? These Britishers come out here and you don't know who they are—and half of them, poor devils! hardly seem to know themselves, if they are put to it. They have all got a certain amount of education nowadays, and they come to your houses

and make themselves pretty agreeable to your daughters; and it's all mighty fine for them, but it mayn't be such a good game for the girls. There is one thing: I know it would be no easy thing for one of the jump-the-country fellows to carry off one of my girls."

"But don't you know anything of the Davenants?" pleaded Mrs. Dunstan.

"Know! yes, we know this much: they seem to have a decent lot of money. They have bought a fairly good farm and paid cash for it. They have lived here five or six years, and I have never heard of anything against them. What they were before they came here I know no more than you do."

"What can I do? He may be all we could wish; and if he is not, I have no real authority over Lucy."

"I can fancy you might as well use your time whistling jigs to a milestone as attempting to induce this young lady to alter her intentions when she had once made up her mind. You don't even know what her people were, do you?"

"No," replied Mrs. Dunstan, nervously, thinking sorrowfully that, though the girl was very dear to her, they had approached no nearer each other than they had been the first day they had lived together. Four years of daily intercourse had begotten affection, but not confidence, and she felt that they had never met "soul to soul." She, with rather a disposition for

gossiping and a full share of curiosity, knew absolutely nothing of her companion's early life. Once or twice she had approached the subject cautiously, as she thought. She had been straightforwardly answered by, "I had hard times once, and I don't like to talk or think of them." It was a disagreeable subject to the old lady, but she would have it done with once and for all.

"She has been with me four years, and was a nursery governess before. I had most satisfactory references with her, and as she does not seem disposed to talk about her childhood—she was little more than a child when I took her—I have never asked her many questions about it."

"If she was like some people one sees," said Mr. Cairns, "I should just say she was ashamed to own to her birth. But somehow I can't believe her to be the daughter of a man who spent his life mending shoes or stitching coats together. There is something in blood, whatever people may talk. As I heard a man say the other day, 'I don't care what it is, from a person to a flea, let me have blood. If it is a man, a horse, a jackass, or a swine, I don't care—if I want it, I must have blood.' The way that girl carries herself, her figure, in fact her whole cut, is superior. And she is as proud as Lucifer. She's so proud that she doesn't ever think it necessary to show it off. Well, if it isn't your business, it isn't

anybody else's. But you can hardly demand an account of himself from the fellow without telling him you don't know who she is. You might find yourself in a deuce of an awkward place if it wasn't that when a man's in love he isn't very particular as long as he can get the girl."

"I suppose not. But I do not think I could ask Mr. Thurstan for an account of himself very well. Couldn't I get it some other way?"

"Well, it is no concern of mine. But there is that cousin of mine, Jock Campbell—Thurstan calls himself a Yorkshireman, doesn't he?—Campbell's somewhere about there, and he has nothing particular to do; I will write to him and ask him to see if he can hear anything of this fellow, if you like."

"Oh yes; thank you. But we shall have to wait at least six weeks for an answer. What can I do all that time?"

"Why not trek?"

"Where can I go?"

"Why, we might all go down to the sea for a few weeks. The change will do the children good, and Loote is always ready for anything. There is a nice little spot, where we have gone two or three times, that will be just the thing in every way. Of course if the fellow makes up his mind to get at the girl he will find some way of doing it; but there is no hotel there, and we can take care that people know that

the house is not too big for us ourselves before we start. I will talk it over with Loote—that is, of course, if you wish to go."

"Yes; I shall be glad enough to go. But there is this party on Thursday."

"Oh ja; you will have to wait for that. There is no power in the world, short of a Kafir rising close at hand, that would get the women to stir with a dance in prospect. Of course our plans may be for nothing. The fellow is probably on his knees at this moment. It's lucky there has been no rain for some time; that garden of yours would be an awful messy place for the business if there had been."

Mr. Cairns had carried on the conversation in a very easy position, in a very easy chair, all the while turning over the leaves of Hester's book, and speaking in a calm, slow voice which irritated Mrs. Dunstan.

"That is nonsense," she said, sharply. "I am not afraid of Lucy's falling in love with a man till she has seen a good deal more of him than she has of Mr. Thurstan."

"Ah well, you know her best, I dare say."

When Hester came in he said to her pleasantly, "Is this New Zealand etiquette, Miss Dunstan? I come to make a polite call on you after the fatigues of a dance and a journey from town, and you rush out of the house directly I get into it."

"You are going to stay to tea," replied Hester, "and I know how fond you are of figs, so I went to get some. Look, here are some particularly fine ones I have put in this corner of the basket for you."

"They look good. I'll forgive you. I believe you think it is a waste of time to sit down and spend half an hour in talking."

"Oh no. If everybody worked two hours a day it would be enough to provide necessaries for all the the world, and nobody would have to work more, the French communists say, don't they? They would probably consider a few things that I like to have luxuries, so I like to double the time for my work, but after I have done that I feel at liberty to do as I please."

"Möchte doch!" exclaimed Mr. Cairns. "You surely are not coming out with revolution nonsense! A swan might as well try to pass for a goose."

"I don't think I shall ever turn the world upside down. But I would rather be a working bee than a drone," said Hester, laughing.

"Do you go in for that kind of thing?" Mr. Cairns asked Bevil Thurstan, wondering if Hester's notion had been picked up from him.

"No; the idea of communism seems to me to be utterly Utopian. I can't say what it might be if it were possible to carry out; but it is altogether impracticable. To act upon it would paralyze the

energy of active men, and idle ones would not earn their salt if they had no personal gain to get by working. And if everything was equally divided one day, by the end of the next some men would have doubled their portions, and others thrown theirs away."

"That speech," thought Mr. Cairns, "is one of the best proofs we have that he is worth something. It sounds as if he had something to lose if the world went topsy-turvy. He speaks without strong language, too."

Mr. Cairns was willing to acknowledge Wisdom when he met her in the streets, though he would not embrace her.

"Yes," he said aloud, "I don't know how men with brains can pretend to believe in such things. Equality! Why, they have only to look at these black brutes here and see if equality is possible! I don't know what the world is coming to! This rascally Government giving up the Transvaal and Candahar! What they are going to do with Ireland I don't know—give that up too, I suppose. They would give up the very devil himself if they had got hold of him. What they ought to do is hang Parnell, and blow Dillon and half a dozen others from the mouth of a gun, and that would soon put a stop to things, I'll bet a new hat. If it wasn't for the House of Lords there is no knowing what

would become of England! What do they want of a House of Commons? Every Jack, Tom, and Harry taken from the shop-counter or the plough's-tail thinks he knows how to govern, and only cares for what he can get by it! What is wanted is men who wouldn't do a dirty thing to save themselves from hanging. Lucy, I think you had better let me have my figs at once. Unless Mr. Thurstan will come over the hill with me, and have a shakedown there till the morning, he ought to be getting on: If it gets dark he won't find much trouble in losing himself, between this and Groenbosch."

"Thank you; but I must go back to-night. I have a friend at King William's Town, who has promised to come over to see me one day this week, and I should not like to be away a night if he was at Groenbosch. He is off to India almost at once, so I think I shall go back to King William's Town with him for a few days."

"Then sha'n't you be at Groenbosch on Thursday?" asked Hester; and wishing to make some amends for her petulance in the garden, she added, "I shall be sorry if you are not."

"I shall try and get him to stay over Thursday if he can. But he may not be able to manage it; I don't know."

"Let us have those figs then at once, Lucy, please, and I will take him over the hill and point

out the direction he had better keep in, or he may have the novelty of spending the night in the veldt," said Mr. Cairns.

"Lucy," said Mrs. Dunstan, after their visitors had departed, and Hester was pouring out the tea, "Andrew and I have been talking of going to the sea next week."

"Oh!" exclaimed Hester, with anything but her usual indifference to plans. She rapidly reflected, "If Mr. Thurstan's friend comes to-day, and they go back to King William's Town together before Thursday, and I am marched off to the sea, the chances are that I have seen the last of him, and all hope of hearing anything of home is gone." For a moment she felt inclined to be rebellious; but the next, something seemed to her to make it simply impossible that she should show her objection to the scheme by word or deed.

"And when do we go?" she asked.

"It is not decided, my dear, that we shall go at all; but if we do it will probably be in a few days."

Mrs. Dunstan herself, though she had been thankful when Mr. Cairns proposed to go, was more than half-sorry to carry Hester out of Bevil Thurstan's reach. He had made a favourable impression on her, partly by being polite to herself, partly by being polite to Hester; but still more by the fact—which was evident enough to Mrs. Dunstan—that Hester

regarded him with more favour than she had shown for any one before. So the elder lady could not help regretting that when what she so anxiously wished for seemed to be working the right way, she was obliged to check it. Had she been left to herself she would certainly never have stirred, but now that Mr. Cairns had put the matter before her, she knew her conscience would give her no rest if she resisted his cautious advice; and she was also a trifle in awe of her nephew, and would not have liked to openly disregard it.

So though she felt very much inclined when she heard Hester's "Oh," to say, "If you don't care to go we will stay," she did not say it; and when Hester asked, "How long shall we be away?" answered, "Till we get tired of it, I suppose."

"And how do we get there?" again asked Hester.

"Of course, my dear, the waggon will have to go. There is no other way of taking the children, and the bedding and the food. But we can take the 'spider' if you like; or, if you would rather ride, I can go very well in the waggon with Loote, and you can go on horseback. Some of the girls and Andrew are sure to ride, I think."

"I would rather ride, a great deal," said Hester; "but won't you find the waggon dreadfully slow?"

"It will be a change, and show me how old I have got. I haven't been in one since I was a girl, and

I think I shall like it once more. Once, Lucy, I lived a whole month in a waggon."

"A month!" exclaimed Hester.

"Yes. The Kafirs had risen, and father had to go off on patrol, and mother was obliged to trek with the cattle and us children. So she took us all up to Graaf Reinett, to Uncle Robert's place; and we were a month on the journey, because we had three thousand sheep with us, and we could only go a very little way each day with them."

"Three thousand sheep! It must have been like Jacob's journey home. You must have had a lot of people with you," exclaimed Hester.

"I don't know that it was much like that," said Mrs. Dunstan. "We pitched no tents on the road. We had no asses and camels, and no maid-servants at all, and very few men-servants. Nearly all the herds had left us, so all the sheep had to be driven in one great flock. Mother drove a four-horse waggon herself, and in- and out-spanned the horses; and there was a covered ox-waggon, with all the household things we could carry away with us, and a lot of cattle and horses. We children did not mind it during the day-time; but the most miserable part was that, directly it began to get dim, all the horses were fastened up round the waggons for fear that they might run away or be stolen, and after that we children were not allowed to get out of the waggon on

any pretence, because mother was afraid we should get kicked."

"And did you find what you left safe when you got back?" asked Hester.

"Ah no, my dear. The house was burnt down and everything gone. It is miserable to come back to the place where your home used to be, and to find nothing but blackened ruins—the very bushes round the kraals burnt. Twice we ran away like that, and then we felt so wretched over it, that the next time we made a laager and stayed on the farm."



CHAPTER XV.

TANTALUS.

"Ah ha, my mistresses! which of you all
Will now deny to dance."—ROMEO AND JULIET.

IT is usual in South Africa for each member of the household to be refreshed with a cup of coffee at an extremely early hour—a pleasant habit. But it puzzles a stranger that on a farm it should be considered absolutely necessary for one of the ladies of the family to rouse herself from her bed to pour out this "früh coffee." However, custom is stronger than comfort, and the servant who has made the coffee has never been in the habit of pouring it out.

As Hester was performing this duty the next day, she heard a rush of footsteps outside. Her conversation the evening before with Mrs. Dunstan suggested a sudden outbreak of the Kafirs; at which she

laughed the next minute on hearing Clare exclaim—

"Ah, you see I have won, after all!"

"You would not have done it, though," answered Agnes, following her up the steps with a pant, "if it had not been for these lemons. I was weighted. Why did mother give them to me to carry! I hate carrying things. And I dare say now we shall have to stay here half an hour before anyone hears us; or perhaps Aunt will be giving us a peppering through the keyhole with her gun. I only hope she will let Lucy have it to fire. I would rather stand my chance with her than with Aunt herself. I hate having anything to do with elderly people and old maids; they are always up to something or other."

"Aunt is not very old, and she is a widow. Where is your old maid? You can't call Lucy one."

"I can if I like. We don't know. I dare say she's as old as the hills. When I am her age perhaps I may think myself still quite young; but now I have my youthful intellect full and unimpaired. I should not be in the least surprised if she is twenty-four."

"Nor I," called Hester. "Come in; the door is unfastened."

"Well, we don't know how old you are," protested Agnes.

"My age does not matter in the least. I don't mind being called an old maid," said Hester.

"That's lucky," said Agnes. "But I beg your pardon; I did not think you could hear me."

"*Cela va sans dire*," said Hester.

"We came over before it got hot," explained Clare, "to know if you and Aunt Mary can be ready to start for the sea on Thursday. Papa thinks, as we must take the children with us to the Davenants' it would be much better to go straight on from Groenbosch the next morning, than to come back here again just to go over the same ground a day or two later."

"You had better see Mrs. Dunstan," said Hester, with her heart like lead. This sounded so dreadfully like settling the matter.

The girls saw their aunt, and soon departed with the assurance that she and Hester would be ready at the appointed day.

Hester felt in despair. She tried to give herself the comfort of reflecting how slight was the chance that Bevil Thurstan knew her brother: but the reflection was of no use; she was as little comforted by it as Job was by his friends. So she fell back on hoping that he would still be at his aunt's on Thursday, and that then she might have an opportunity of setting her mind at rest one way or the other. Fortunately the intervening days were busy ones, though anxiety forced a hearing often enough in spite of work. Hester's state of mind was such that she did not

know if she dreaded or longed for the time to pass quickly.

Mrs. Dunstan, who noticed that she was getting thinner, tried to help her with her arrangements; but Hester would not be relieved, and so her days were busy. The nights, however, seemed very long, and, unless she was worn-out with bodily fatigue, were spent in pacing the length of her room in darkness.

"Was there nothing to be done? Must she only endure? There was nothing to be done. She must only endure," were her constant question and answer. "Mind shall triumph over matter," she determined; "and though I cannot keep the fever out of my brain and get to sleep, I can make myself eat my meals. And if Mr. Thurstan is there on Thursday I will be as pleasant as I can be to him, and get possession of him for as much of the evening as I can. Of course people will say I am flirting—what does that matter to me? I am beyond the power of most people to touch."

Then came a consciousness that the society of Bevil Thurstan would be pleasant to her, even without the forlorn hope in connection with it. "Playing with edged tools, am I? What matter! The game is worth any amount of candle."

As she considered that to please the eye was a likely prelude to general pleasing, she gave more attention than usual to her dress, and at last chose

a black satin trimmed with soft old lace, which she rightly judged would be a good set-off to the softness of her complexion and the glory of her hair.

"Won't you be too tired to dance if you go on horseback, Lucy?" asked Mrs. Dunstan, when she found that Hester and Clare had decided to ride.

"I think riding the least tiring way of getting over these roads," replied Hester.

This was true; but she mentally added: "If Mr. Thurstan is there I shall not think about an ache; and if he is not there, I do not care whether I can dance with anybody else or not."

In fact, for the time he was the axis on which her mind revolved. It was for his eye that her dress was chosen; of his taste she thought as she mingled the lightest blue flowers with maiden-hair ferns for her little bouquets, which a spray of jessamine redeemed from scentlessness.

"Don't forget to tie up your faces, or you will be nearly black by the time you get to Groenbosch," Mrs. Cairns said as she drove off; and Hester, though her complexion was pretty weather-proof, did not forget the advice.

Clare, although she did not talk so much as Agnes, was, upon occasions, a better talker, and on the road pointed out different objects of local interest—the spot where her grandfather and a little band had defended themselves against hundreds, and had re-

treated from bush to bush till they reached the laager; the height from which six houses were to be seen; the traces of a Kafir kraal in the bush; and the stones worn to a hollow for pounding mealies and the red ochre the natives use as the ancient Britons used their woad.

Though to all of this Hester only gave sufficient attention at the time to be able to respond enough to encourage the monologue, she could remember it distinctly afterwards. She was giddy with anxiety, and kept her hand on the crutch of her saddle as she urged her horse over the last half-mile, desperately longing to calm her suspense. The horses dashed through the little drift and bravely breasted the steep rise on the other side, crossed a dozen yards of level ground, and stopped at the garden gate.

"I am so glad you are here," she said, with a sigh of satisfaction, for Bevil Thurstan and Frank Turner were waiting to help them to dismount.

"Here, you Totties," said Frank, to a couple of Hottentot grooms standing near, "walk these horses about a few minutes before you off-saddle them. You girls hadn't much mercy on your horses. We were watching you as you crossed the plain."

"Our horses are so fat that a little work will only do them good."

"You are loyal, Clare," said Hester; "you do not say that it was I who started our race."

"No. If I had thought we should hurt Gazelle and Endymion I should have checked you."

"Where shall I send for your things?" asked Bevil, as they went towards the house.

"I do not want anything fetched, thank you," said Clare; "I shall dress in the waggon. It is much more convenient than sharing a room with a dozen other girls."

"In the waggon?"

"Yes," said Hester. "Don't you understand that, like the snails, we travel with our houses!"

After greeting the hostess, and refreshing themselves with some hot coffee, the girls retired to the waggon, and helped each other to dress. Half the waggon was already arranged for sleeping—two tiers of beds being placed, like the berths of a ship, one above the other; but they were doubled-bedded berths. This still left Hester and Clare plenty of room to stand up and move about in.

The house at Groenbosch was only on the ground-floor, and had no passages. Entering from the verandah, Hester found herself in a large room that was cleared for dancing. Behind this was another of the same size, in which a supper was laid; and from each doors led to other rooms, which in turn opened to another series. Several had doors on the verandah, which could thus serve as a passage on necessary occasions.

"Mamma and Aunt Mary are probably in this sitting-room," said Clare, crossing the hall.

Excitement had given Hester a flush like the heart of a chestnut-blossom.

"I have never seen her with so much colour before," thought Clare. "It becomes her. How well she holds herself, too, and walks like a queen among women!"

Suddenly she saw that every trace of colour went out of her face, even from her very lips, and the figure that had been so straight rocked. But it was only for a moment.

"Are you ill, Lucy? Let us turn to this bedroom," she exclaimed.

"I beg your pardon?" Hester said, in a strange voice that Clare would not have known. "Ill? Oh no, I am very well indeed."

And the step was as firm and the carriage as erect as before, while the colour slowly came back to her lips and the bloom to her cheeks.

On entering the house, Hester had looked from one group to another seeking Bevil Thurstan, who, however, was not in any of them. Other faces were nothing to her, and she passed over them lightly; but her eyes fell on a stranger who stood talking to John Davenant, and were arrested.

She caught one sentence. "I am a Cornishman, so of course I am supposed to be well acquainted with such luxuries as squab-pie and pilchards."

The voice came like the clear echo of well-beloved chimes; it was the school-boy voice of her brother Edwin turned to the deep, full tone of a man. The face, too, was Edwin's face, though now bearded and manly.

She went into the sitting-room, receiving and acknowledging greetings without heeding them. Her course of action must be decided upon instantly. For one moment she thought of quietly retreating to the waggon, and spending the evening there alone. The next she told herself that it was impossible—she could not do it. Then, could she be mistaken? She had read and heard of remarkable likenesses, of cases of mistaken identity. "No," she thought, "she could not be. It was her very brother Edwin." Then, must she hide herself? No; fate had brought them together, and if she went away she would have to return: she could not stay out of sight knowing that her brother was close at hand! She would risk everything. She thought she could scarcely be more miserable than she had often been, and felt a kind of desperation about herself. And yet to find her again might give her relations more pain than it had cost them to lose her, so she would take any precautions she could. Would Edwin recognize her as she had him? She did not think so. Her height would not mark her here as it would probably have done at home, for many of the girls in the room were as tall

as she was; while her face and figure had both lost the roundness they had possessed in girlhood. Her hair, too, was brighter than it had been, and she had always worn it loose; whereas, now, her forehead was covered by a thick fringe, and the rest was closely braided at the back of her head.

Hanging from her necklace was a pendant that Edwin himself had given her, of slight intrinsic worth, but greatly valued by her on account of its donorship. Turning aside, and stooping over a book of engravings on a table, she disengaged it, and carefully put it into her pocket. The lace she had on had belonged to her mother, but as Hester had never worn it at Caervean, Edwin had probably not seen it since his babyhood; and "if he has, it is hardly likely a man would remember such a thing," she thought. "I must sit where I can look at him," and she changed her seat to one on the other side of Mrs. Dunstan, that she might be able to gaze through the open doorway.

"There he is, wasting his words on John Davenant, who cares no more for him than anybody else, when every syllable to me would be as cool water on a burning wound. How tall he has grown, and how good-looking!" she thought, with pride. "He is very much like Papa."

Bevil Thurstan came up and stood by her. "So you have pushed your horns out of your shell," he said.

She had forgotten his existence. Edwin's appearance had been like the rising sun quenching the brightness of the morning star. She felt inclined, like Diogenes, to cry, "Get out of the sunshine," for Bevil blocked her view into the next room; but remembering that she must not betray herself, and longing for confirmation of her conviction, she said: "And your friend—did he come?"

"Carnsew? Oh yes; there he is," moving aside and pointing out the stranger. "He is a fine-looking fellow, isn't he? And he is as plucky as he looks, too. He has seen something like active service for a young fellow."

"How has he shown his pluck?" asked Hester.

"Well, for one thing, up amongst the Zulus once, when his men were retreating, one of them lost his control over his horse and was carried back among the blacks. Carnsew tried to rally his men for a charge to rescue the unfortunate wretch, but they wouldn't turn, and then he rode right back himself, and alone brought off that man after one of the Zulus had already snapped his assagi to stab him at close quarters."

Hester, glowing with pride, waited, hoping to hear more, but Bevil stopped; and at last she said, in a tone which a desperate endeavour to render indifferent made cold, "Yes, he is certainly good-looking."

"Do you always build castles in Spain, at a dance?" he asked. "To-day you looked as far off as the first time I saw you; and yet your face was not sad but pleased, excited and defiant. You would have served for a model of an Amazon just leading her troops into battle."

"If you are always going to see so much expression in my face," said Hester, angrily, "I shall have to turn my back to you, or see if I cannot, for once, serve as a model for Medusa, and freeze you into—silence, at least."

"I will get you a programme," he said, without the least attempt at an apology. "You will give me this quadrille they are now forming, won't you?"

Hester had a sharp struggle for a moment. She longed to rush to her brother and, throwing her arms around him, claim him boldly. It was very hard that she must take her part in the entertainment with other people as if he was an utter stranger to her, and wait with what patience she might to get a chance introduction to him. But she knew it must be so, and took the offered arm.

She found herself placed opposite Edwin, who was dancing with a relative of Mrs. Davenant's also visiting at the house. Hester thrilled with pleasure on seeing her *vis-à-vis*, but the next moment a sharp pang of jealousy rent her soul. The girl stood there smiling and chatting lightly to her brother, and he,

too, smiled back and talked in the same tone to her, and yet she herself had to stand aloof and give him no word of welcome. Her brain seemed reeling sometimes. She saw almost every movement they made. It was a pleasure to her that the skirt of her own dress brushed against his foot the first time they passed each other; and later, when she gave him her hand, she almost forgave the other girl the blessing of liberty of speech.

After the fourth figure, in which she was left in his charge to be led up and down the room, she began to feel that her debt of gratitude to Bevil Thurstan was immense for bringing her this chance meeting with her brother, and while treasuring every look of Edwin's, she tried to do her best to be pleasant with his friend.

No sooner, however, was the quadrille ended than John Davenant claimed her for a waltz. She was obliged to dance with him, and have the bitterness of seeing Edwin whirl Agnes Cairns round the room.

"I shall hate that girl if I don't take care," she thought. "Oh, Tantalus! I can feel thy agonies; I hope I sha'n't go mad with them."

She had felt impatient and jealous at seeing a stranger taking up her brother's attention, but to see a girl whom she knew receiving it made her hot and angry. Agnes was rather a noisy flirt, and to hear

her laughing and talking as fast as she could utter her words, made Hester's heart throb and her eyeballs burn.

However, she had not to endure it long. When the music stopped, Bevil made his way to Edwin.

"Carnsew, I want to introduce you to Lucy Dunstan."

"The girl you were talking about yesterday?"

"Yes. There, Davenant is taking her over to her mother. A fine woman the old lady must have been in her time, but she could never have been fit to be spoken of in the same day as her daughter. What do you say?"

"The girl is very handsome. Don't take me up to her for a moment, Thurstan. Let us stand at this door a minute. Something in the tone of her voice, when I heard her speaking to you just now, made me think of a sister I lost when I was a boy, and I suppose it was that which made me fancy afterwards that there was a little likeness in their faces. I am hardly master of myself now, when I think of her."

"Ah, now I know why I fancied I had seen her face," thought Bevil. "I shall never forget that scene on the beach at Caervean—that girl running after the tottering old man and clinging to him as if she could not let him go, and then going back and shaking out her shoes. When I got to know Carnsew, and went down to stay with him, I recognized the

spot, and felt dozens of times inclined to ask who they could have been; but something seemed to forbid my mentioning them. I wonder what became of those two. I suppose the girl was Carnsew's sister, and that Lucy Dunstan is really like her in some way."

"Now I am ready for the plunge," said Edwin. "I will do the polite to any extent. But I suppose I must not go too far in that line, old fellow, or you will be calling me to account for it."

"I shall have no feeling in the matter. The girl has rather taken my fancy, of course, but nothing more. There is a carelessness of feeling about her towards other people which is rather taking to a man whom she does not treat in the same fashion. The first time I saw her she told me she did not care enough about anybody in the district to like or dislike them, and the indifference was real enough. That was enough to put a fellow on his mettle, and make him have a shot at one feeling or the other, or perhaps both—for they are pretty well mixed up sometimes. Miss Dunstan, this is Captain Carnsew, the hero of a hundred fights, at your service."

Then Hester was made happy. To have his arm around her, though the embrace was the formal one of a stranger waltzing with her, was ecstacy. She made little remarks, just enough to prevent her seeming dull, but not too many, for that would have

deprived her of the pleasure of hearing his voice and the few sentences that would be treasured as priceless to the end of her days. She took note of every detail of his dress, from his boots to the way he wore his hair. "I am thankful he is no fop," she thought; "but I should think no Carnsew could ever be that."

After a time Edwin took her to the refreshment room. "You dance like my sister," he said.

"What a compliment from a Britisher," exclaimed Agnes Cairns, close by. "You might have paid it to me, I think, Captain Carnsew. Lucy doesn't enjoy compliments half as much as I do."

But Hester, having hooked her fish, was not going to lose it or share it with any one else if she could help it; so with a passing reply to Agnes's remark she moved on.

"I hope it *was* a compliment," she said to Edwin. "But I have known men who did not think that everything their sisters did was perfect."

"I am a very loyal brother."

"Ah, then, I suppose your sisters are your devoted slaves and cannot make enough of you when you are at home. What terrible anxiety you must give them sometimes."

She scarcely knew what she was saying. She was longing to make the conversation personal instead of general, yet hardly dared to do so.

"As for that, one of them is married, and so has

plenty of other things to soften down her anxiety on my account. The other, too, always seems to find enough to do, but I dare say she spends some not very pleasant hours when she hears there has been a scrimmage anywhere near my quarters. But it is wonderful how accustomed to that kind of thing people get. Else what a time of it a sailor's wife would have; every piece of unknown wreckage that was found would be a tragedy to her."

"Yes, I suppose one does get used to everything in time," said Hester. She dared not look up, lest the hunger for more tidings should show itself in her face and eyes. Which was married? Mary? Yes, Mary. She could not fancy the old house without Joan; and she remembered that her father used to say that the best and the worst women were the ones who did not marry, and surely Joan could have few peers. "Is your home near the sea?" she asked.

"Yes; with no land between it and America."

"I have heard that the sea on the south-western coast of England is wonderfully blue."

"That depends on the weather, you know. On a clear day it *is* an Italian blue; but I have often seen it when it is almost all white foam, and sometimes many shades of green, indigo, almost black, and grey. Our cliffs are fine. There is a little harbour called Boscastle, almost close to King Arthur's Tintagel, which is very grand; and, in fact, all down

the coast they are well worth taking a little trouble to see. Are you engaged to anybody for the next dance?"

"No."

"Well, then, if you care for that kind of scenery, I can show you some fair enough specimens in a book of Thurstan's I saw on the table in the sitting-room just now. He had a turn of dabbling in photography once when he was staying with me, and used to take everything he could get at."

Hester hurried through the dancing-room close to Edwin's side, fearful lest she should be accosted on the way. Then she seated herself in the corner of the room with a table in front of her, and when her brother stood by her she thought, "It is not likely that any one will come and ask me to dance across the table."

And she was right: a quadrille and a gallop passed, leaving her still in undisturbed possession. They talked pleasantly as they looked at places they both knew so well, where they had scrambled about together hundreds of times, catching little crabs or getting mussels for their own especial eating. He pointed out cliffs and caves to which they had given particular names when they had been their enchanting playground.

"And this?" said Hester, when they came at last to a view of the house.

"That is where my people live—Caervean."

"It looks such a large house when compared with the little ones here."

"Yes, there is plenty of room there for three people to live in without quarrelling, isn't there? But when my married sister and her husband and the children come home to stay, and my brother and I are there with a friend or two, that house does not seem at all too large or lonely. Isn't that a child there among the trees? Will you look?—your eyes are younger than mine."

"Mistake about number nineteen," thought Hester, as she replied, "Yes, there is a little face, I think."

Just then Bevil Thurstan joined them.

"You are looking at my attempts?" he said.

"No, at your successes," answered Hester.

"Isn't that one of Mary's youngsters?" asked Edwin, calling his attention to the child he had noticed. "I thought there were not any of them at Caervean when you took the house."

"I took this six weeks ago, when I ran down for a few days just before I came out. One of them was there—the eldest, I fancy. 'Hester,' they called her."

"So you have taken up your photography again."

"Yes; what a pity it is they have not found out how to get the colours too. There was a lovely light

on the sea when I took this one," he said, turning to a view of the beach just below the house.

"All in good time," remarked Edwin. "Science is one of those things that won't be hurried; but, as we have the saying in our country, 'Patience and perseverance wear away moorstone posses.' Is your west-country knowledge up to understanding that word?"

"Posts?"

"Right."

Mrs. Davenant came to the table, and, after saying a few words to Hester, carried away her brother to be introduced to some one else.

The lump that rose in Hester's throat prevented her speaking for a minute, and she and Bevil Thurstan silently looked down together at the spot where they had first met; and each in that moment of silence thought of that time. Hester thought of all that she had dragged herself from that day, and wondered that she could ever have done it.

Bevil was wondering by what strange influence that chance meeting on the sand should have created a sympathy between the girl at his side and himself.

"Have you painted my picture for me?" he asked at length.

"I have done my best to make one."

"Thank you. It is here?"

"Yes, it is in the waggon. I put it where I might easily get at it, in case you asked for it."

"Is it too much to ask you to go for it now?"

"I don't mind going."

"It is too cold for you to go out as you are; I will get you something to put on."

"It is a midsummer night."

"Yes, but these rooms might be a midsummer noon, I think."

He brought her a plaid to the verandah, and wrapped it round her shoulders, turning an end over her head.

"These stones are rather awkward; you had better let me guide you," he said, taking her hand and drawing it within his arm.

"Do you return to King William's Town with Captain Carnsew?" she asked.

"Yes, we start to-morrow; but I only stay a few days. He leaves in a week's time. I must go and get some more of your figs when I come back."

"I don't suppose you will find any. We are on our way to the sea, and I expect the Kafir children will scarcely let many of them get wasted."

"You are going to the sea! Where does that mean?" exclaimed Bevil, in a rather blank tone.

"Somewhere near the Kowie, I believe; I have never been there."

"Then I suppose you are glad of the change?"

"No, I don't want to go. I don't know why we must be tacked on to the Cairns's skirts; but I sup-

pose it is not considered advisable for two forlorn women to stay out on a farm by themselves."

"No, of course not; but you could have got somebody to stay with you while Mr. Cairns was away."

It was a picturesque scene they came upon: the three or four waggons drawn up together, each with its little fire, at which its Kafir leader and driver were resting.

Hester scrambled up at the back of the waggon, and had no difficulty in finding what she wanted, for the waggon was already lit up.

Mrs. Cairns was trying to get her youngest baby to sleep. Hester got outside, and, fastening the sail after her, jumped down.

The moon was shining brightly, and the orange and lemon trees were filling the air with fragrance. She and Bevil walked the length of the garden and back before they re-entered the house. But they only took one turn, for Hester was impatient to get where she could use her eyes and ears.

The night passed all too rapidly. She had two more dances with her brother, and, what she prized almost more, she sat out another with him. She saw that the rooms were thinning, and longed with feverish anxiety to be able to stay the flight of the remaining minutes. Mrs. Dunstan had retired early, but Mrs. Cairns stayed, to come upon her like fate and cut short her happiness.

"You girls must really go and get some rest," she said. "The waggon is to be in-spanned at daybreak, and we shall none of us, I am afraid, be feeling much inclined for a journey in it."

"Whenever we are enjoying ourselves there is always some nuisance or other," said Agnes. "Why can't the waggons wait for us till the afternoon? It is almost daylight now."

"Well, come along, then," replied her mother. "We need not dress again till we out-span for breakfast. Clare and Lucy, of course, have no need to come out to the waggon. I will send in Nantooke with their habits, and she can bring out their dresses to me, so they will not be disturbed when we start."

The two girls went through the bedrooms, seeking a place to rest themselves in. Hester could not help thinking that the scenes she saw must resemble the interior of a town just after a sack. A row of black nurses lined one wall of each room, all squat on the floor with babies in every imaginable posture, while the beds were covered with ladies, some dressed and some partially so.

Hester and Clare managed to get some sofa cushions from the sitting-room, and lay down on the boards in the hope of getting to sleep.

END OF VOL. I.

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